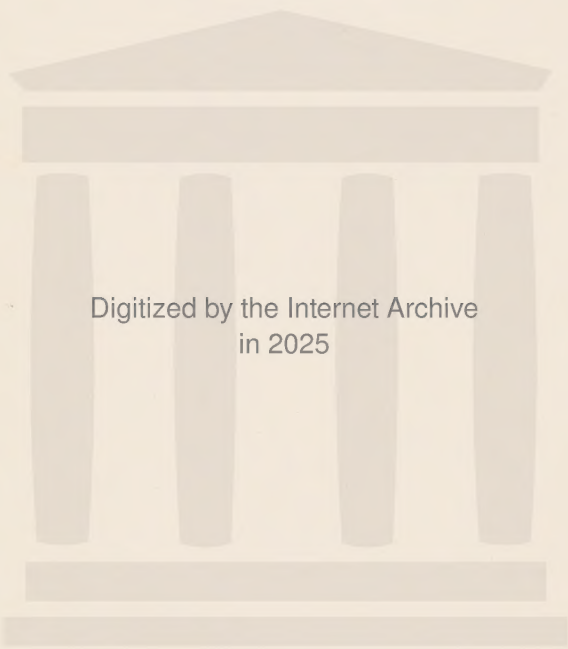




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LENA'S PICTURE

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A STORY OF LOVE

BY

MRS. RUSSELL BARRINGTON

VOLUME II

What's the best thing in the world?
June-rose, by May-dew impearled :
Sweet south wind, that means no rain ;
Truth, not cruel to a friend ;
Pleasure, not in haste to end ;
Beauty, not self-decked and curled
Till its pride is over plain ;
Light, that never makes you wink ;
Memory, that gives no pain ;
Love, when so you 've loved again.
What's the best thing in the world ?

Something out of it, I think.

MRS. BROWNING.

EDINBURGH

DAVID DOUGLAS

1892

LENA'S PICTURE

CHAPTER XIII

Thy heart is mine ! True, true ! ah, true !
Then, love, thy hand !—Ah, no ! adieu !

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

AS the train took the travellers further and further from Bayreuth on their road to Wurtzburg, and as they were nearing one of the many junctions where they had to change carriages, Constance put into words what the other three as well as herself were feeling :

‘What tiresome people call “the realities of life” seem to be beginning again,’ and she hunted for a precious bag which had got hidden by some other article of personal luggage. ‘At Bayreuth it is only but right to give oneself up entirely to the emotions ; but now, somehow, luggage and possessions—all the irksome things in life—become depressingly prominent again.’

Gustave had just been thinking he ought really to speak to Sir Bernard as to what had passed between Lena and him; and this was a duty more than a pleasure. Much as he liked Sir Bernard, it was not easy for Gustave to speak to him on a matter of feeling. Sir Bernard, without knowing it, was endowed with a formidable manner. He had an abundance of the true Englishman's shyness, though his magnificent appearance and kindly manners seldom let it out. With Constance alone he was never shy, and with her alone entirely disappeared the formidable side of his magnificence.

Gustave took an opportunity of saying, as he was walking up and down the platform of the junction with Constance, waiting for their next train, that he thought he ought to speak to Sir Bernard, but that he found a difficulty in so doing.

'Speak to me instead,' said Constance. 'It will be better, and I can tell Sir Bernard anything there is to tell.'

At that moment their train came up. They reached Wurtzburg in the afternoon; and towards evening, after dinner, they strolled out and made their way past huge piles of

churches and many-storied houses, flowered over by Early Renaissance ornament; past vistas of side streets, visible through shadowed archways, down to the river and on to the bridge, dignified by an avenue of statues of kings and bishop-magnates pinnacling every pier, and led off encouragingly by 'Pepinus,' a somewhat frivolous person smartly dressed in furbelows, with arm and foot in advance as-might-be leading off a dance.

'Let us go down here,' Constance said to Gustave, turning to the left towards the old stone flight of steps leading from the bridge down on to the quay. Sir Bernard and Lena were walking on in front. 'I am very sorry for you,' she continued, seeing Gustave looking uneasily after Lena, but still walking across towards the steps; 'but one can't talk out a thing comfortably with the chance of being turned round upon and being interrupted at any moment.'

So down the steps Gustave had to follow her, on to the quay, leaving Sir Bernard and Lena walking on across the bridge. They first wandered through piles of crockery spread out on the ground for sale, and then along the walk by the river.

'You remember, Mr. Allbrectht, the sermon you gave us at Cologne on Wagner?' Constance asked, when they had got clear of the crockery and the people selling it.

'Perfectly,' and Gustave bowed ceremoniously towards her.

'Should you still maintain that his art can be quite fully enjoyed without any personal element of excitement being connected with it?' She spoke gravely.

Gustave gave a quick look into her face, and saw the twinkle in her eye.

'Oh, Lady Lovat,' he answered, half-laughing, half-sighing, 'do any of us really know anything about anything till we fall in love?'

And then they started and talked their subject well over: Constance extolling Lena, her charms, her virtues, her sorrows, and her music; Gustave delighting to find such an appreciating, sympathising friend.

'But now, please, Lady Lovat, do tell me something about this brother "George,"' pleaded Gustave.

'Ah, yes; there is her brother "George,"' Constance replied reflectively. Poor George! In him seemed to centre all the odium of their difficulties.

‘Lena can’t hear from him till to-morrow. He is very good, and will not be selfish ; but that is why Lena will be guided by him. Her judgment always follows George’s because she knows he is so disinterested and high-principled. Our Lena has a head as well as a heart.’

They turned and looked back, and exclaimed almost together, ‘How beautiful !’

The sun in setting had left an orange space, brilliantly clear, between the horizon and the edge of a solemn, dark, purple cloud hanging weightily and motionless across the sky. The light above the horizon was reflected in a trail of broken, quivering ripples of floating gold, down along the surface of the river towards them. The line of the bridge, softened in the middle distance, stretched out long across the stream, its straightness broken by the statues starting up at every pier, clearly cut in russet purple against the blue distance of hill beyond. Dark forms of boats and barges moored against the quay threw one side of the river into warm, deep shadow. From the other bank, in climbing masses of form, from the line of the bridge, rose the hill guarded by the solid wall and fortifications of the old castle, edged by a line of turrets above, cut

out sharply against the liquid brightness of the sky. Just opposite where Gustave and Constance stood, the mouth of a forge opened a yawning cavern of fierce fire, which trickled down in blood-red reflections through the ripples of the river reaching to their feet. Strangely impressive was the scene in its strong contrast of piercing, thrilling, almost tragic light and shade—solemn and ominous; both light and shade so full of ardent colour. As Gustave looked at the heavy, still, purple cloud suspended over it so immovably, he felt seized by that anxious alarm which, though he hardly acknowledged it to himself, was now ever sentinelled in the background of his thoughts—the verdict which ‘*George*’ would give! Then he looked into the brilliant crystalline light below the cloud.

‘How beautiful!’ again ejaculated Constance.

‘And she is somewhere in it all!’ he added, with a sigh—the truly sentimental sigh of a German in love!

It may appear somewhat paradoxical, but while with Constance, while talking out his love for Lena with her, he felt actually more sentimental about it than he did when in Lena’s own presence. Constance had a nature

which irradiated an atmosphere of its own. Those coming within this radius felt her influence as stimulating to their own vitality. She excited the people she was with into feeling something of her own vividness of sensation. The more so as her nature was unselfish, her sympathy for others warm and generous, her mind full of interests outside her own personal life. This stimulating effect on those with whom she came in contact worked a greater vitality into the personal interests and feelings of those so influenced; and it was in this way that Gustave caught from Constance something which he transferred to himself and his relations with Lena, and which made him feel supremely sentimental. When with Lena he felt supreme contentment; the worshipping at a shrine was still the prominent delight in the feeling of their intercourse together. When Gustave had called Lena his 'Elizabeth,' it was not with any reference to flying from the temptations of any Venus, or Venuses, of creation; but that he found in Lena's nature, so calm, earnest, and simple, and yet so pure and passionate, a haven of safety and protection from the restless sensitiveness, the excitability,

the self-consciousness, the uncomfortable shyness and self-despising—all the qualities, in fact, which tormented and worried him in his own nature. But while talking about Lena to Constance, the delight of being in love was in all prominence ; and when, the walk ended, he met Lena again, he gazed at her with, if possible, an increased love and admiration.

As the hours passed by, and nearer and nearer approached the hour which was to bring George's answer, the more carefully did Lena avoid being alone with him. She fully realised to herself the truth. She could not have helped what she had done ; all the same, her tender conscience felt remorse. She reproached herself by thinking, if it all had to end there and then at Wurtzburg, she had by her weakness created a far greater sorrow for Gustave than had she waited for George's answer before telling him she loved him. For herself, for having given her whole love away so suddenly, so completely, she had no shame, no regret. This beautiful thing that had come to her, waking the best part of life out of sleep—this beautiful ruby-winged god, as Constance had called him—not for one moment would she pretend he was unwelcome.

For ever and ever must existence, that hitherto starved existence, be the richer for his coming, whatever struggles and heart-wounds he might bring in his wake. Still, with an almost sickening impatience, she waited for the letter.

She had made exact calculations; she knew the hour when it ought to come. On purpose, when Gustave asked her when it was due, she had not given him all the data she had possessed herself of. She must be alone when she found it—when she read it. The evening came, but before the post arrived a walk was suggested after dinner, and Lena started with the Lovats and Gustave; but she slipped away before it was ended, peremptorily telling Gustave to remain with the Lovats, and, hastening by a short cut, reached the hotel almost breathless. Even then she was late. The post was in, and the letters had been carried upstairs. She flew up to the large, odd-shaped room used to sit in by the party. She looked at the table—yes, there it lay!

A strange thing, that anxiously awaited envelope containing within it our fate! It appeals mysteriously to us with its inaudible words: the well-known handwriting; the

marked stamp bringing it from the him or her who is to decide whether happiness or misery is to be our portion. Lena picked her letter up quietly, but her heart was beating visibly, the folds of her cloak rose and fell as she panted. She turned and sped quickly into her bedroom, and, shutting the door, turned the key, and, still remaining standing, tore open the envelope and read:—

‘MY DEAREST LENA,—You are quite right in saying I cannot know all till I see you; and I cannot fully understand till I know all. I am bewildered, as you must be, by the suddenness of what you tell me has happened. We must not, therefore, either of us be in a hurry—nor will, I am sure, Mr. Allbrectht be in a hurry—for a final decision. But, however long we wait before coming to it, you must realise that neither I nor any one else can decide this for you. I have no right to influence you where the happiness of a third is concerned, even though that third be a stranger to me. But this advice I may give you:—Do not definitely reverse the intentions we both formed years ago on reasons which, when we formed them, seemed quite conclusive, without calmly going over in your own

mind those reasons again. I think you must allow at least a few days to go by before you can feel your judgment is quite to be trusted. You have not been living in your usual surroundings. Music has always a strong influence on you, and, from what you say, Wagner's music is evidently singularly exciting. Decide nothing, if possible, for a few days. You say you are happy; I need not tell you I am glad of that. If I seem to be unsympathetic, it is because I am naturally surprised, and you must remember I have never even seen Mr. Allbretcht, nor, till a week ago, ever heard of him. I do not feel as if I had anything more I can say at this moment; and for this letter to go by return, as you wish, I must send it in a few minutes. Many things that I might have said will, doubtless, come to me when it is gone. Forgive its brevity and all its shortcomings: I have had so little time to think over a matter of such immense importance to us both.—Always your affectionate brother,

‘GEORGE PREVOST.’

Lena stood quite still in the same spot, with the letter in her hand, when she had finished reading it. She only raised her eyes and looked out of the window, but without con-

sciously seeing anything. Her heart sank. A light seemed extinguished—a light which had given the whole of life a glow, a radiance. Now the world was again that grey, sad world which had doubtless its comforting elements, but where the atmosphere never rang with free joyousness. Indeed, ever since she had left Bayreuth that glowing light had flickered a little. She had felt anxious, uncertain, but had deferred facing this sense of flickering till George's letter should come and definitely decide for her. And George said she herself must decide for or against her happiness! Ah! but she knew George, and she knew herself well enough to know also that in this question, as in all other questions that had ever arisen in their lives, they must be one. She had almost made herself hope, while under the blissful spell at Bayreuth, that George would be able to prove to her that all they had hitherto thought right could take a changed aspect in consequence of this wonderful happiness which had changed the aspect of the rest of life to her. The fact was, she had avoided really thinking. Love had come to her: into a trance had she fallen. Love, happiness, music had obliterated for the time the

normal realities of her life. The rosy glow of Love's sunshine had pierced into the greyest shadows, and had given even these shadows another and a brighter hue. But, the glamour quenched, the light of happiness withdrawn, there they were—grey! oh, grey as grey could be! And so real! Then Lena tried to recall her talks with George about their sorrow and all it entailed. How they had agreed to bear it together always as long as they lived; how it was no shame, though the hard world doled out its pity with such a good share of contempt, if they afflicted it on no one else. She realised now, from her new standpoint of life, how old all this had made her feel while yet a child. Tears of self-pity started to her eyes as she thought of the short spell of real youth which came to her at Bayreuth; and it was already over! Yes, the scales had fallen from her eyes—the blinding scales of love. The love was there, God knew, in all intensity; but not there for her happiness—for her misery instead! The light of it was quenched by the stronger shadow, which had asserted again its inevitable hold over her life.

She heard a footstep coming along the passage,

and the door of the sitting-room opposite opened. She felt it was Gustave coming eagerly for news. He had a right at once to know. She unlocked the door, and, opening it, saw him in the room opposite. She went straight to him and held out George's letter.

'Read it,' she said faintly.

On seeing her so pale and unnaturally quiet, his heart sank within him, but as he read he revived. George so clearly gave over the decision to her. He threw the letter down on to a table, and seized her two hands. 'You see,' he said, 'your brother naturally and rightly says that it is you, and you alone, who can decide.'

She wrenched her hands away from him, and said in an agitated, hurried voice, 'That does not make it easier. You must leave me.'

He started, and was going eagerly to protest, but she went on quickly:

'You must leave me for a few days. I will think, and think, and do my best—indeed, *indeed* I will; and I will write again to George; but I cannot feel now that it will ever seem right. But you must leave me now; I must be alone; I cannot trust myself, for when you are with me I cannot think.

There seems something which fills up every minute, and hides all the past and the future.'

'I do not understand,' ejaculated Gustave, in a puzzled but almost exasperated voice; 'but, of course, you mean whatever happens you will see me again?'

'Or write.' Lena felt quite unequal to explaining to him the grounds for her hopelessness—the conditions of life forced upon her for so many years: how could she explain them to him? He had always lived in the very fulness of life—how could he understand the duties that such a different order of things entailed upon her?

'No! no! I must see you,' he said almost fiercely. Then, after a pause, 'Darling, you do not know how cruel you are.'

His voice shook, and Lena looked up into his face. It was very white, and a frown of pain contracted his brows. How it went to her heart to see him look so miserable and unstrung! How she hated herself for giving him such pain! How she longed to tell him that she too felt hopelessly miserable! But the words would not come; she could only say in a low trembling voice, 'Ask Lady Lovat to arrange it.' Then she faltered out, 'Good-bye.'

He started and gathered himself together.

‘Let me understand better what you mean, Lena,’ he began in a very determined but quiet voice. ‘You told me your brother must decide for you whether you would become my wife or not. That already seemed strange enough to me, loving you as I do, and hearing from you that you return my love. Now your brother says most rightly that it is only you who can decide such a question, and now you seem hopeless! In God’s name, what do you mean? My child, you are scaring your judgment by some quibble of conscience. You are dreading to be happy because you are so accustomed to an incomplete life that you think any other must be wrong. But trust me—I am many years older than you are—there is quite enough anxiety in every human lot, however happy it may seem, to sober us all into the knowledge that this earth cannot be a Paradise. And when a pure, beautiful happiness comes to us, such as our love for one another, it seems to me to be quite wicked to refuse the blessings it brings with it, and create for ourselves the misery of a life-long regret.’

‘No, it must not be that to you,’ she cried eagerly. ‘You must put it from you—and

in time forget it. You must work at your art—that can fill your life.'

What he had said sounded so plausible; but oh! how outside the real difficulty Lena felt it all to be! She paused, and then added falteringly, 'We have not known each other a fortnight!' She looked up at him.

'A fortnight!' he echoed, and a scared ghost of a smile passed over their pale faces as they looked into each other's eyes.

Then Gustave broke out rapidly again. 'A fortnight!' he repeated: 'why, what of that? One does not take a fortnight when one sees a Titian, a Giorgione, to find out that it is perfection! A few moments does it, and one never remembers it as anything else but perfection. We artists pass our lives in struggling and striving, never being satisfied with anything we do, because it is not the perfection we crave for; but we pass our lives in trying to attain it. But when it comes to one in the form of a human being, not only outwardly perfect, but with every perfection which satisfies heart, brain, and spirit, everything in one that is worthy to live—do you think it wants more than a fortnight to realise that that is *the* fact of our life, and must ever remain the

one great fact if one lived to be a hundred ? Why, my child, every moment since one was born, one has been accumulating power to appreciate and worship it. It is like mockery to talk about forgetting ! I cannot forget myself. How could I forget that other self in whom every grace is embodied, every quality of nature which I have longed for but could not attain to ? Is it likely I could forget such a satisfying perfection when I have once found it in a living woman whom I love, and who says she loves me ? My child, that is really what love means when it is such as ours. We may be as unlike superficially as it is possible to be ; but nature has made us one in that inner, deeper sympathy which makes it perfect happiness to be together. We have found our selves in each other. I have found my better self ; the calm, the serenity which Nature made me long for as the fulfilment of my best instincts, but which she has denied my possessing in myself for my own comfort. You have found the vitality and strength in me which would make your life brighter and fuller if you gave it into my keeping. Have we any right, dear Lena, to refuse to take such help when we have the chance, setting aside the question of happiness ?

Lena did not speak for a moment. Then she said with a sad and dreary sigh : ‘ You cannot understand—because you have never lived through sorrow such as ours. My love for you might destroy your life, instead of helping it. We have had this great happiness. Could we not remember it, as we would a beautiful picture, as outside our necessary life ? I did not mean a fortnight was too short a time to know what love was ; but that we have not learnt in a fortnight, and away from our home surroundings, to lean upon it in our daily duties as part of our expected help—as relations and friends lean on each other when they become ingrained into the expectations of everyday life. There cannot be the same obligation when these feelings, however strong and overpowering, are only a few days old, as when the habit of friendship would make it cruel to break the tie. I feel you could not enter my life as it has been built up by the past without your own life suffering. That I could not bear. I might try to tear myself away from my past and enter your brighter, fuller life ; but that I could not do with my whole self. I could not forget the suffering of those so near to me, which is

a moral and mental leprosy exiling the sufferers in a much more complete and sadder exile than could any physical disease. I could not be light-hearted, and I should be always remorseful that I could not.'

The Lena who had felt always so much older than her years had returned, as the thought of her home-life and all its conditions had been recalled by George's letter and the responsibilities it suggested.

Gustave looked at her gravely, and, though not allowing his mind to entertain for a moment the suggestion that there might be reason in her argument, he yet followed it sufficiently to remain silent when she paused.

She added shyly in a low, very quiet voice, looking straight into his face: 'Cannot we keep the happiness of these days enshrined in that best part of us which owes so much to our friendship?'

Then Gustave began again with an impetuous rush of words: 'I cannot pretend that would satisfy me, or even be a source of comfort. No, if you decide against me you must realise, though not for worlds would I have missed the joy of loving you, there can be no happiness for me, there can be no mitigation

of unhappiness. Time may influence you ; but I am no boy. I am old enough to gauge the importance of my own feelings. I know my life-love is yours, and yours alone, "till death us do part." While you are alive I can have no thought unconnected with you. You may insist on our parting, but you will be with me, nevertheless, however faint and remote the fact of my existence may become to you.' He spoke passionately, almost angrily.

Lena felt roused almost to resentment.

'How little you understand the pain you give me ! You must not doubt my love—it is cruel ! It makes it so—so difficult—for I know how it must be decided.' She fell into a chair, and, covering her face with her hands, sobbed passionately.

'It is for you, darling, you alone, to decide,' he said tenderly, bending over her. 'Read your brother's letter over again.'

'Yes, I know,' she said wearily, shaking her head, but not lifting it. 'It is for me to decide against myself—if it were only against myself !' she continued, lifting up her face and looking straight across the room. 'I was so selfish not to have thought it must come to all this before I let you love me.'

‘Come to all what?’ Gustave exclaimed, with quite angry bewilderment. ‘I feel as if you were holding me in a vice I could not wrench myself out of. And it is all unreasonable, wrong, utterly cruel.’

‘No, I was wrong at Bayreuth—not now,’ Lena said faintly.

She felt quite unstrung, and looked up at him helplessly, with such an utterly wretched and woebegone face he was in a moment pacified, and continued in a kind voice :

‘My dear child, as if you had anything to do with it further than by being yourself! It was nothing you *did*, but what you *are*, that makes it utterly impossible that I should do otherwise than love and worship you with my whole being. That is how you must think of it, since you have allowed yourself for a moment to think it possible that we can part. You are rejecting what is neither yours nor mine to control. Could either of us have helped it, then it might become a matter of conscience; but upon my honour,’ he said again, with almost irritated anger in his voice, ‘it does seem curious to me that you should speak of your love for me as you do, and yet for one moment think of denying it to me.’

Lena trembled, and a sickening kind of hopelessness came over her. If he could not, or would not, help her in doing right, how was she to do it? She answered faintly, 'We cannot help our feelings, but we can help our actions—the actions we have time to think over, at least,' she added hastily. She paused; then in a low shaking voice, looking away past him out of the window, 'It is now, because we have time to think what action is most right, that it becomes under our control.'

He did not answer, but began pacing restlessly up and down the room. His eyes looked bleared and his face anxious and wearily pale. Oh, that he could really be angry with her! Possessed in her slim, girlish youth of such a power of resistance,—a tower of strength which foiled all reason and argument! But her power of suffering, and the love which he knew in his heart she felt for him, saved her from his real anger. All the more he felt provoked. He stopped and stood over her, looking down sternly as if trying to see through her.

Lena felt her strength for further discussion and resistance ebbing fast. She stood up and walked past him towards the window. 'I must be alone to think,—I mean I must not

see you for a few days. Ask Lady Lovat to arrange it.' Then she turned to him and faltered out 'Good-bye.' He stretched out his arms to her ; but, looking down and turning away towards the door, she shook her head sadly and left the room.

Constance was waiting for her in her bedroom.

'Will you go to him?' Lena said with a sob in her voice.

'Do you want me to say anything from you, dear?' and Constance put her arm round her.

'No, but he wants to see me again after I have thought more over it and written again to George and got his answer. If it is possible, will you arrange it?'

'Yes, of course—it may come all right yet.'

'Oh, no ! I have been in a dream ; and now suddenly it seems so clear, it can't, it ought never to be.' A kind of dreary despair rang in her voice, and her usually steady, calm eye looked almost wildly past Constance out of the window up into the sky. Stretching out her arms and clasping her hands tightly against the back of her head, she went on impetuously : 'But I will think it all over again and again and again ! Go to him now, please—I know you will be kind.' The tears started in her

eyes. 'You may be kind—why may some people be so happy!'

Constance seized Lena and folded her in her arms. 'My darling!' she said, feeling quite ashamed of her own happiness in life.

'He is waiting; go to him,' Lena sobbed out.

'Poor, *poor* Gustave!' Constance said to herself as she crossed the passage and opened the sitting-room door. She found him pacing up and down the room looking wretched, bewildered, and provoked. Constance felt very unhappy herself, and looked scared and white. As she went up to him she said apologetically, 'Lena asked me to come to you.'

'Lady Lovat,' said Gustave, almost angrily, stopping short in front of her, 'this is all wrong: I cannot understand how she can suddenly take this attitude. I know she believes she is doing right, but she is under some delusion. Her brother and she have become morbid over their sorrow in that quiet, dull country home. Pray, Lady Lovat, help me to make her see things more reasonably. Even if the family malady did attack her, am I not the right person to share with her the misfortune? She has given me her love—that is as much as a thousand marriage services. She

ought as part of her love to give me the privilege of sharing all that befalls her, or the dread of what might befall her. But suddenly she raises a wall between us. It makes me dumb before her. These ideas are not only so unreasonable, but so stubborn ; and they appear to overwhelm every other feeling.'

'It may be that the old habits of thought which she has lived in with her brother all these past years have been recalled suddenly by his letter,' Constance replied in a soothing, quieting voice, and sitting down near him. 'I will indeed do my best, for your happiness has become mine too.' She looked up in his face with a kind, sympathetic, and almost childlike earnestness, and motioned to him to take the chair opposite her. 'But we must not forget that our Lena, being the faithful Lena she is, cannot suddenly forget, and leave her past behind her and fly away from it into a new life of happiness. Besides, that past means an aching sorrow which has depressed her vitality ; and now that this letter has revived the old associations, her judgment may be a little distorted and morbid.'

'You cannot think she is right, Lady Lovat ?' he asked sharply.

Constance paused a moment. 'I do not think you or I have the data on which to form an opinion definitely as to whether she would be right or wrong in refusing to be happy. We neither of us have had the personal experience of such sorrow as she has lived in always. The iron entered into her soul, poor child, when she was not more than a child, and grief sapped away from her much of the power for being happy as most young things are happy.'

'Yes; but surely this love which has come to us both with a sense of great happiness and helpfulness was given to us in its perfection to make up for this sad life in the past. She ought to give me her life in all confidence, whether for better or for worse, to guard it from all sorrows that can be escaped from and to share all those sorrows that are inevitable.'

'Whatever happens,' Constance exclaimed eagerly, a glow of admiration brightening her face, 'she has the great happiness of being loved by one who is worthy of her; and as we are talking of Lena, that is saying a great deal.'

'If worthy to love her, surely then worthy to share her life, Lady Lovat?'

‘To tell you the truth, Mr. Allbretcht,’ Constance replied after a moment’s pause, ‘I feel diffident about forming an opinion. Though I am married and older in years, and have had a very full life in a very full world, I feel that Lena is really older, and in the higher life of feeling more experienced than I am. I have always been happy, and have only known sorrow through sympathy; Lena has known it through personal and very painful experience. But I do feel quite certain about one thing: it will be her own sound judgment she will use, certainly unprejudiced by her desire to be happy, but also equally unprejudiced by any self-will or desire to pose in any dramatic way, which is such a temptation often to inferior though conscientious natures, when they are overstrung. If she sums up against you, it will also be against herself, her own heart’s desire, and only because she cannot help following what she feels to be the rightest right. Lena will be true to herself, and therefore cannot be false to any one else.’

‘Ah! that is the worst of it,’ replied Gustave with a weary sadness, dropping his head into his hands: ‘she will have all the strength, not to say obstinacy, of feeling she is acting

rightly ! But she will not see that there is a duty as strong or stronger than any other duty towards the nature we are given. It surely, moreover, becomes a duty to be happy in this world when the source of happiness is a strength and a good to others ?'

'Do you know, I doubt, Mr. Allbretcht, whether Lena has the courage left to be happy. She once told me she did not feel as if she had the courage to wear bright colours. In the same way I don't think she feels as if she had the courage to go in for bright happiness such as love would give her.'

'She has got into a depressed state, living in that damp West of England,' exclaimed Gustave with irritation in his voice. 'But if she would give her life to me, I would be so grateful and happy with anything her nature, without any strain or effort, was able to give. I do not want high spirits. I want Lena as she is, or would be under any condition. Her very presence makes it Heaven to be near her.'

'Yes, yes; I can understand,' Constance said with eager sympathy: 'even as a friend, not even counting our mutual affection for one another, I know how that grace of quiet gravity and gentleness, allied to that absolute

feeling of trustworthiness one has about her, affects the atmosphere and gives one a sort of indescribable satisfaction in being with her. She has all the charm of youth, with all the wisdom and definiteness of experience. She is such a finished thing.'

'Ah, exactly,' Gustave exclaimed, feeling in Constance's understanding sympathy a relief for a moment from his irritation.

'But I 'm so sorry,' Constance went on with contrition in her voice: 'Lena says she wants you to go away for a few days while she thinks it all over quietly and writes again to "George." You need not be frightened and think that absence will make your cause less urgent. We must both face this fact: that Lena will not be influenced in her real judgment by anything but real reasons. I will do my best for you; but I cannot pretend to hope that I or any one else but "George" can influence her; and even not "George" further than because he has lived her past life with her and knows the ins and outs of it. I thought you might go to Rothenburg and join Lord Brampton; bring him on with you, and meet us all again at Cologne next Saturday. That would give time for "George's" letter to be there.'

Gustave looked away thoughtfully and sadly out of the window ; then, after a pause, 'Thank you, Lady Lovat. I suppose I must go if she says I must, and you say I had better.' Another pause. 'I know you will be my friend ; but we are all so weak in her hands ; she seems to have made even you think she is reasonable. And she is *not*,' he added emphatically. 'She does not mean it, but she is cruel and unreasonable.'

'Oh, no ! no !' exclaimed Constance ; 'cruel she is not, and you must not say she is. She suffers now in all this quite as much as you can ; and if things do not come right, she would suffer more in the future. You have your art, your life of activity as a man, to fall back on : Lena—only a quiet, monotonous English country life in a small way, playing second, as nearly all women have to, in all matters of any real interest.'

'That is precisely what I long to preserve her from,' Gustave exclaimed, starting up and beginning to pace up and down the room again. 'Is it not enough to make her mad, with all her passionate love for music and fine sensibilities for everything beautiful and refined in thought, feeling, and art, to live in such depressing surroundings, with all the

associations of madness, and no companionship except morning and evening a sight of this "George," and now and then a talk with that clergyman friend of hers?'

'Oh, Mr. St. John! he is good, *very* good!' replied Constance with bright quickness; then she added with a sigh: 'It is very puzzling, you see, Mr. Allbrectht; Lena's nature is one which could never enjoy any beauty on any lines, were such enjoyment in the smallest, tiniest degree procured at what appeared to her a sacrifice of moral beauty. That is the meaning, really, of this great strength you and I feel in her. She is very reticent, and never talks much; but she is more sensitive to moral beauty than any one I ever met with. I feel myself that I see the distinction between right and wrong through the intellect; but Lena feels the finest ramifications by instinct, and nothing could influence her to do wrong, however strong the persuasion or inducement. Her brother, I fancy, is the same. They have old Huguenot blood in their veins. It may be that which makes them so uncommon.'

'There is no one at all like her in the whole world,' Gustave exclaimed.

‘I think not, though I’m only her friend, not her lover; so we must obey her. You must go off to Rothenburg, and join us at Cologne on Saturday.’

‘And you will do your best for me, Lady Lovat?’

‘I will.’

And so it came to pass the lovers parted that day—Gustave leaving early the next morning. Before going to bed, Lena, after a long talk with Constance, wrote to George.

‘Your letter made me feel I have been living in a dream. As I read it I awoke and saw that unconsciously I have done very wrong. Yet I do not feel as yet quite prepared to decide definitely, and have followed your advice. I have deferred giving Mr. Allbrectht an answer for a few days. He has left us, and will join us again at Cologne next Saturday. I have been thinking over everything that has ever happened to you and me, George, and all the talks we have had together. Though I feel we were quite right when we came to the conclusions we did, yet is it not possible that we did so not knowing the full meaning of life? This new experience—though it cannot,

in any smallest degree, supplant any affections or experiences in the past—seems to belong now inseparably to my life of the present and of the future. It is not a feeling added on, but fused into every other, giving a fuller and a more beautiful meaning to the whole of life. I do not say this ought to change the conclusions we have always come to; but as you may not yet have experienced what I am now feeling, is it not possible that you may not know that there are conditions when we should both think it right to come to other conclusions? This falling in love brings with it such a sense of wonderful fulness and happiness, it seems it *must* be meant as a blessing. It comes so entirely without our acting, or thinking, or making it come in any way.'

Then Lena wrote on, repeating the arguments Gustave and Constance had used, and ended her letter by asking George to answer by return to Cologne.

Constance had put very forcibly to Lena every argument telling for Gustave's view without exactly expressing her own opinion as to the weight they should have. Had Lena been weak enough to be influenced unduly by such arguments, Constance would not have

thought it right to use such influence ; but she knew Lena would decide entirely from her own sense of what was right, and that sense—whatever conclusion it made her come to—was entirely to be respected, as it would to the last degree be disinterested. There were four days for Lena to think, and then George's answer would come, and Gustave would return to them ; and then—alas ! That was hardly a joyous *then* to look forward to ! Only, on the plea that till *then* they had not said good-bye, there was just a faint possibility of a respite. But by little short of a miracle could anything occur, Lena was beginning to feel, to make real, satisfying, sound happiness come out of it all. She repeated over and over again the reasons why they had determined never to marry. She remembered how George had comforted her one day, when her mother had been making things and appearances impossibly difficult, by insisting that this family calamity brought no shame with it, if they bore it alone and made no one else suffer by it. The isolation it entailed should, he had said, be part of the meaning to them of bearing their cross and following the God of loving, unselfish sacrifice. She remembered how all her pain and pity for

Gertrude had found a kind of healing in the thought that gladly would she accept any self-sacrifice as an endeavour in a way to share, for Gertrude's sake, her sad life. Always, from a child, she felt a resentment against any happiness Gertrude could not share with her. And now, when the first real temptation came, was she going to throw over all the feelings and resolutions of the past? She felt a contempt for herself as the plea rose in her heart for the youthful happiness of love. What had her life to do with such happiness? But then—Gustave! The pale weirdness of his face came back to her so often, as he stood stretching his arms towards her as if a great pain was making him dumb; and she moving away from him saying 'Good-bye,' without a word of love or regret. Who was she, to give pain like that? Ah, well! it would not last: and she sighed as she thought it would not last—or, rather, pretended to think it would not. He had his art, his much-loved art; he was a man, and would love again! And he must never, never know how dreary her life must be. And she looked into that life in the future, and it all seemed one dreary, long ache!

CHAPTER XIV

Wenn zwei von einander scheiden,
So geben sie sich die Hand ;
Und fangen an zu weinen
Und seufzen ohne End.

Wir haben nicht geweinte,
Wir seufzten nicht weh und ach !
Die Seufzer und die Thränen,
Die kamen hinter nach.

HEINE.

SIR BERNARD developed a wish to see Bamberg, so back to Bamberg the Lovats and Lena returned on the line which had brought them from Bayreuth. Constance then wished to show Lena the beauties of Heidelberg, so on to Heidelberg they went,—and so passed the time till, early on Saturday morning, having slept at Mayence, they found themselves on the Rhine steamer which was to take them down to Cologne. There had been little talk, since Gustave had left them, of the subject which engrossed their thoughts, though Constance lived in the lovers' situation almost as much as did Lena herself. On principle, however, she did her best to make Lena even

superficially take some interest in other things. All she felt it was possible for her to do in order to help Gustave was to keep Lena's mind natural and prevent it from becoming morbid. She found Lena ever ready to blame herself for having allowed herself to live in a dream at Bayreuth—for having allowed herself to be happy even for a few days.

To Lena, everything she saw—the imposing buildings at Bamberg, the castle at Heidelberg, the rushing Rhine, and the moving scenery as they rushed through it down the current on the boat—all were merely as language in which the thoughts of that vivid anxiety were clothed : that vivid anxiety to see rightly and do rightly ; to fulfil all the obligations which the past had woven into her life, and those also which her conduct at Bayreuth had entailed. These could not be utterly ignored, however desirous her sensitive conscience might be of punishing herself for feeling a happiness which she told herself she had no right to feel. She felt she ought to do nothing but think over such obligations during the four days she had before meeting Gustave again. But oh ! how few of us are exempt from the thoughts and the feelings we do not mean to think and feel ! Suddenly—when

the sound of the organ pealed out and came to her through an opening church door ; or when the evening light would breathe a poetry of its own over the matter-of-fact world ; or when the warm midday sun would shimmer in amidst the soft rustling of the crowded leaves—suddenly Lena would be back in that dream, would feel the joy of that love-potion running through her veins, and in his gaze, as she looked into his eyes, she would find herself, her best and fullest self, glorified by his love. Then came, with a kind of despair, the sense of what a terrible sacrifice it would mean definitely to reject this happiness for ever ! Nevertheless, as they neared Cologne and the awaited letter, came over her with sickening hopelessness the thought that the real struggle was near, and must be gone through, and that she would have to sum up against that happiness. And what an empty world would be left for her to live in without it !

Gustave was to arrive late that evening—so late that Constance had said it would be better to put off seeing him till the next morning, whatever George might have written. The letter was there when they reached the hotel at five o'clock. Sir Bernard gave it to Lena

as he followed her into the sitting-room sorting the letters the porter had given him. That same room where, a fortnight before, Lena had played her lovely music and Gustave had recognised in her a sister-artist !

‘Come soon,’ Lena said to Constance, her voice faint with excitement, as she escaped with her letter out of the room to her own. She read :—

‘MY DEAR LENA,—I never intended to tell you what happened to me three years ago, for I know what you say is quite true : till we know what love is, we do not understand the full meaning of life. I, as they call it, fell in love, and I cannot but believe that the feeling was in a measure returned. I did not at first realise what this happiness would lead to if I encouraged it in myself and the friend who inspired it. In this I was very much more to blame than you were, for with a man lies the responsibility of awakening a response in the feelings of the woman he loves ; and if, for any reason, he cannot devote his life to her happiness in return for her affection, it is careless selfishness to act in any way which creates such affection. I had thought so little about such matters that, unawares, I found myself in a

false position. The temptation was great, but I could not bring myself, after careful consideration, to see that any other course than the one which we had both always decided as the right course was possible. The worst sorrow in it was the thought that my friend would think me insincere, and that I had been but trifling with her feelings. Many, many times I longed to go to her and tell her my real motives, and of my great affection for her, but each time the selfishness of such a course deterred me. The certain knowledge of my love, and the pity which would have been excited in her on account of our family trouble, might have made her friendship of a more serious and lasting kind than if I remained silent and she were to conclude I had felt but a passing admiration. It is with great difficulty I bring myself to write you all this ; and I know I need not even ask you, dear Lena, to abstain from referring to it in the future. I write of myself because I feel you ought to know how very serious I believe the reasons to be which would prevent my marrying. You have long known what they are ; now you know that they had sufficient weight to oblige me to carry into practice my principles on the sub-

ject—not only at the cost of my own greatest happiness, but at the risk of being misunderstood by one whose good opinion I cared for more than for most things in this world. This may seem a very inadequate answer to your last letter. But I confess that I find great difficulty in answering it. I seem to read in it a weakness which is not your own; you seem to use arguments in it which are against your best sense of what is right. I cannot believe you could ever be satisfied—nor yet happy—in any life if you had made happiness the aim irrespective of all previous conditions though they have come to you without your power of control. I do not think you have been to blame in the slightest degree for what has already happened; that also was evidently beyond your own control. You have now, however, to act with full consciousness of what your action may entail. You, and you alone, I must repeat, have to decide what it is right to do. That your decision may involve pain to one you care for is a grief to me, for I know by experience that will be by far the bitterest sorrow to you.

‘Always your affectionate brother,

‘GEORGE PREVOST.’

Lena read it through, then turned back to the first pages. A pink colour rose to each cheek, a bright light flashed in her eye. Constance, coming in, stopped suddenly at the door and looked at her. With a brilliant but rather puzzled smile she asked, 'Is it all right, then, dear?'

'He is all right,' exclaimed Lena fervently. 'Oh! George! He is good, more than good! I cannot give his letter to you this time, because there is something in it about his own life; but it has given me strength. I can, I will do without happiness,' she went on passionately. 'After all, what is it? Is it really worth going one thread-line off the best road to secure—even if one were certain to get it? If only, Constance, I did not feel how wrong I had been!—how much I have increased his sorrow by not thinking soon enough that such happiness was not for me!'

To herself she thought, 'George did! How far nobler he was!' But, with a sigh, she could not help feeling what a difference it would have made had the relations between George and herself been more frank, and without that deadening, depressing reserve on all subjects which were in any way emotional. Had there

been a touch of that sympathy and readiness for sympathy, and power of expressing sympathy, which Constance and Gustave possessed in such delightful abundance, and which had made the last fortnight seem a revelation to a fuller life, independent of her sentiment for Gustave, what a different home for Lena Islebarton would have been! There was something, nevertheless, pathetic in the loneliness to which this reserve exiled poor George. Lena had not the faintest idea who the lady was he had loved, nor could she recall anything in his outward conduct three years before which could mark the time when he was passing through such an ordeal. She was recalled to her own situation by Constance saying:

‘Then, dear, you have quite decided what your answer must be?’

‘Quite,’ said Lena firmly. ‘Can I not see him to-night?’

‘It will be so late; his train is not due till 11.30. He will be already very tired with his long journey; I think you had better put it off till the morning.’

But when Constance was next alone with her husband she said, ‘I will sit up and see poor Gustave Allbretcht to-night.’

‘Would it not be better to let him have his night’s rest before making him wretched?’ answered Sir Bernard.

‘I don’t think so; he will be in a fever till he knows, and I want it all to be done as pleasantly for him and Lena as it’s possible to do a horrid thing like this. She is so full of remorse, and if he shows his disappointment by any bitterness it will hurt her so; and Heaven knows she doesn’t want much more, poor child, to make her cup run over!’

‘Shall I stay up with you?’

‘No; go to bed, by all means. Men don’t mind being natural and showing their feelings before women friends; but he would feel hot and shy before you, as well as miserable. It’s a great point, Bernard, I think, to get over crises like this as pleasantly as possible: and in helping that to come about is the only way in which a third person can be of any real good. One ought to try and bury love decently in a comfortable friendship if possible—or at anyrate in the semblance of one, if the principles can’t rise to the real thing. It does make such a difference afterwards, and takes a good deal of the sting out of it at the time.’

‘How do you come to know so much about it, Constance?’ Sir Bernard asked, looking at her with rather an anxious curiosity.

‘Do you think, my love,’ she said, ‘a woman with two eyes in her head and ever so tiny a scrap of brain behind them goes through three London seasons as a girl, and five as a married woman, with the consequent country-house visiting after each, without learning something of the *vraie vérité* of such matters?’

Constance did not tell Lena she meant to see Gustave that night. Sir Bernard had told the porter to show him straight into their sitting-room, and, lighting his cigar, wandered by himself down to the river. The evening air was warm and still. Constance sat looking down into the garden, thinking over how she could best silver the bitter pill. Travellers still lingered below on the benches and round the tables, smoking and drinking coffee. One by one, and group after group moved away, and the place had become dark and deserted, when the bell sounded loudly at the entrance, announcing the arrival of the omnibus from the last train. Constance’s heart gave a little jump. ‘How I wish I hadn’t to do it!’ she said, half-aloud, and growing very white. A

few minutes, and then steps were coming along the passage. As the door was opened by the waiter and Gustave came in, his eyes were dazzled by the glare of the lamp. Behind it he then saw a white figure—Constance, not Lena. Against the darkness of the open window she looked wraith-like in her paleness, and for a second she did not move. Then, quickly forgetting her own difficulties and everything but the poor, pale traveller as he was at that moment, staggering in behind the light of the lamp, she came forward with eager kindness to meet him.

‘I stayed up to see you; the others have gone to bed. Is Lord Brampton with you?’

‘Yes, but he is tired, and has gone straight to his room.’

The waiter shut the door, and they were alone. Constance sat down again in her seat by the window; Gustave fell into a large arm-chair opposite her. In a dry and almost soundless voice he said at once: ‘Have you bad news or have you good news to tell me, Lady Lovat?’

‘Bad, I am sorry to say;’ and Constance looked away out into the darkness as she went on: ‘Lena got the letter from her brother

when we arrived here to-day. She could not show it me, but it has quite definitely decided her that she must say good-bye to you here.'

'Her brother——' burst out Gustave, with passionate resentment.

'No,' interrupted Constance quickly; 'it is not her brother's decision; it is her own, and she had virtually come to it before she received his letter. But,' she added with feeling, 'I did not sit up to give you bad news—all that you must hear from herself to-morrow morning. She does not even know that I am seeing you to-night; but I wanted to ask you to do me a favour.'

He made a movement suggesting that any favour she could ask must be granted.

'We both love our Lena, and, poor child! she is very miserable and remorseful; she thinks herself so much to blame for what has happened. Nothing now, I am convinced, will make her change her view as to what is a right course for her to take; but I want you, as my friend as well as hers, not to show any anger, but to try and help her through it with as little pain as possible. She feels things so dreadfully, she has had so little happiness in life, and now she has the greatest happiness

that life can yield offered her, and she refuses it because she thinks it right.'

'It seems to me hers is such a perverted view of right!' Gustave exclaimed with sad vehemence, leaning forward and dropping his face into his hands.

'That may or may not be,' Constance answered quietly. 'But it is Lena's, and you will not change it. Her bitterest sorrow is the thought of grieving you. I need not tell you how much she loves you, but she can do more easily without happiness for herself than most people can. I suppose it is their Huguenot blood. Both she and her brother have a stern vein in their natures which they turn against themselves, and which strengthens and enforces their sense of duty. A necessity for happiness has been deadened in them from the normally sad condition of their home life; but Lena is as tender-hearted and scrupulous in not giving pain as it is possible to be.'

'More so, then, I should imagine, than her brother,' Gustave broke in viciously.

'Oh! please do not hint that to Lena!' Constance begged imploringly. 'I do not think it just; but whether it is or whether it is not, such a view would only make her

more miserable, and would make her feel far away from you and utterly lonely.'

'But what do you want me to do?' poor Gustave asked, looking up very pale and wretched and at the end of himself.

'I want you to see her to-morrow morning, and I know you will be kind and merciful, not angry or reproachful. Then I want you and Lord Brampton to spend the day with us, and during the few hours you have left together to try and be comfortable friends. It will make it all so much better for her afterwards, and, more than anything you can say, will make her forgive herself.'

'As if she had anything to forgive herself for!' he said with a sigh of irritation, and rising from his seat. 'I will do my best. Good-night, Lady Lovat, and thank you; you are a really kind friend; of course, we must all do as you bid us.'

And as poor Gustave lay awake dismally thinking over his misery, the only consolation which came to him, though he hardly recognised it as consolation at the time, arose out of Constance's friendship. His resentment against Lena's decision became gradually mitigated by the resolve he took to show the

truth and worth of his unhappy love in great gratitude to Lena for hers ; and with the early morning hours came a happier, softened condition of mind, and he fell asleep.

Constance, having told Lena she had seen Gustave the night before, arranged that the lovers should see each other alone after breakfast. Lena opened the door quietly, her heart beating very fast, and her feet moving very slowly under her. She saw Gustave sitting near the window, his head resting in his hand. He was pale, and his eyes looked very light but gentle, without angry, tempestuous fire burning in them, such as Lena remembered as they flashed on her at Würzburg, and which she almost expected to see in them now, she felt such a culprit. He turned as she shut the door, and looked at her as she stood for a moment motionless, very white and still : the slight little figure in the soft grey dress which he rarely lost sight of now, either in his sleeping or in his waking dreams.

Gustave got up and crossed the room. He held out his hand ; she took it without moving, and looked up into his face. It was very serious ; she could not begin, she felt so choked and dumb. But Gustave, just clearing

his voice, said in a kind, quiet voice, 'So—we are to be friends and nothing more.' He still held her hand, but with no lover-like, passionate grasp; only with a kindliness that meant a desire for a good understanding.

'Shan't we sit down?' he added, seeing she was nervous, letting her hand drop and turning towards the window. Lena fell into a chair opposite the one Gustave had been sitting in, and he went on speaking in the same gentle, unagitating voice:

'I must, of course, accept your decision without more discussion, though you cannot expect me to think it is a right one; but we need not talk of that any more—it would only give us both unnecessary pain. But there is something I want to say which, as far as anything can give me pleasure at this moment, would give me satisfaction to say. I want to thank you for the great happiness you have given me, in giving me your love and making me so inexpressibly rich even for a few days. I do thank you with all my heart. You have made me feel the greatest joy I have ever felt; even the sorrow it now entails would never make me regret it for one single moment. You have given me a standard of happiness

so far higher than any I had before experienced—a happiness certainly far above my deserts, and which will remain, I hope, ever with me to purify, to ennoble, and to calm my life.'

He spoke still with the same restrained gentleness, but as he turned and looked into her face there was a light in his eye, a radiant enthusiasm in his expression, which went straight to Lena's heart. She had had little sleep; she had, as the hours crept on, felt more and more with a nervous alarm the sense of a crisis being at hand. She could have fought her ground, she could have resisted any temptation; but this kindness and consideration, this generosity and gratitude, were too much for her strength, and, covering her face with her hands, she could only sob like a child.

'I do not deserve anything from you but blame, for I have been wrong, and have made you unhappy,' was all she could say through her tears.

'My dear child,' he said, distressed into tenderness, and leaning forward towards her, 'I have told you more than once before, and I tell you again, you have *done* nothing;—that you *are* everything my nature requires in the woman it can worship and love is not your fault; and when I tell you that the one thing now that

I should regret most in life would be to forget the happiness you have given me, you cannot and must not reproach yourself. If you will allow me,' he added after a pause, 'I should like to accept Lady Lovat's invitation and remain with your party to-day till you leave this evening; but if you would prefer my not doing so, please say so quite frankly. We must be friends,' he added, looking earnestly into her eyes, 'whatever else happens.'

'Oh, yes, yes,' Lena gasped, looking very wretched and tear-stained. 'I should like you to stay—only, after to-day you must try and forget me.' Then hurrying on in a nervous voice, 'You must love some one else, and then I will no longer reproach myself. But till then I cannot help doing it, for I accepted what I had no right to accept, and what I might not keep.'

Gustave had risen while she spoke, and was standing over her. His voice sounded to her stern, almost solemn, as he began :

'You must not mistake me. I accept your decision only because I am helpless to do otherwise. As far as my feelings are concerned, they could not change; nor should I think it was right they should, any more than had we married. I am yours till death us do part.'

Lena grew white as a sheet, and looked scared. 'Oh, it may not seem like that after a time: it is only a fortnight. Try for my sake,' and her voice trembled painfully, 'try to change.' He almost laughed. 'It makes me so utterly miserable,' she went on hurriedly, hot tears again brimming over, 'to think I should have made you unhappy—you of all people! And if you say it will last all your life, how can you expect me not to reproach myself?'

She sprang up. If she went on, it would all come back again, that wild dream of love and happiness! He caught her hand, and, holding it quietly in both of his, said in a firm voice: 'Do not be afraid that I shall tease you any more with begging you to do what you think would be wrong. At the same time, do not let us deceive ourselves by closing our eyes to the truth. While you live, I can love no woman as I love you. Your love for me may be a passing episode in your life; but if it is not, if it is of the same nature as mine for you, absence and distance will only make it more of a reality to both of us. I accept the inevitable since it is you who determine it. You said, and said very truly, we cannot control our feelings, but we can control our actions. But

because we do so, for God's sake do not let us be untrue to our feelings; do not let us pretend that this love which has been given us is a slight, passing feeling, when in all truth it is the deepest reality of our natures. I accept your decision without a murmur; do this at least for me—leave me with the feeling that you do not wish to resent or despise the love you gave me.'

The fact that her hand lay in his hand steadied and calmed Lena. It *must* be the clasp of friendship only. Looking steadily at the pattern of the carpet a few yards in front of her, she answered in a low, firm voice: 'I shall remember you always as the dearest friend I ever had! I shall remember the last fortnight as the one time in my life when I knew the real meaning of the word happiness.' Then she added with more power in her voice: 'But we must say good-bye to-night; we must not hope ever to meet again. It is the only way,' she repeated sadly. 'Your life and your art must go on as if I had never seen you. I will do all you have just asked me—I could not do otherwise; but we must not meet or write.'

There was a pause, a silence; then a deep

sigh from Gustave. 'I must, of course, obey you; but my last word is, and must always be, that I think your decision wrong. From the highest motives my nature is capable of conceiving, I think you should act differently. Though striving to do what is right, I think you are doing wrong. However, I did not mean even to allude to this: you have had time to think and to weigh all reasons for and against, and you have summed up against me.'

'And against myself,' pleaded Lena in a quick and trembling voice, looking with earnest distress into his eyes. Those eyes, as they met hers, seemed to say, 'More is the pity!' Then he dropped her hand, and, moving a little way from her, murmured, 'The pity of it, aye! the pity of it!' But he had sworn to himself in the sleepless hours of the night that he would not tease her with more pleading; and he turned to her again gently, and, lifting her hand, reverently pressed the slight, soft fingers to his lips, and walked away silently to the window. Lena slid noiselessly out of the room. Still a few hours remained before the final wrench.

The day passed in a curious way to all the party. As is always the case when everybody

talks about everything but the one thing which everybody is thinking about, nothing any one did or said seemed quite real or of any importance. Lord Brampton's presence, nevertheless, was of service in keeping things outwardly natural and pleasant.

Constance did her best to make things easy for the lovers, and to make them, as far as they could, enjoy the presence of one another. They took a carriage, and, Lord Brampton seated on the box, continually turning round to give information or receive instructions, they drove about Cologne all the morning in search of a shop where Constance thought she remembered seeing some particular 'bon-bons' she had set her heart on taking home to some particular children. The search was in vain, but other 'bon-bons' were found, and on the way a few churches were revisited and architecture discussed. In the afternoon, after luncheon, Lord Brampton produced his sketches, and while they were looking them over a rather lazy discussion arose on the respective merits of Rothenburg, Bamberg, and Nuremberg. An hour or so slipped away : the afternoon was hot, and the sky was clouding over.

'We want some tea to revive us,' Constance

said ; ‘ would you kindly ring, Bernard, dear ? We have all travelled so far and seen so much, we have many days’ as well as of nights’ sleep due to us before we are our intelligent selves again.’ Then, when the reviving tea had been drunk, settling herself comfortably in a big lounging chair, she said, ‘ I suppose, Lena, you would not like to play to us ? ’

There came no answer for a moment or two ; then Lena rising, said quite decidedly, ‘ Yes, I will play, if you would like it.’

‘ Shouldn’t we ! ’ exclaimed Lord Brampton, and he gave a little prance of delight, and Gustave rose to open the piano. She began playing Beethoven’s *Andante* for the piano, and for the moment it did her good, throwing the pent-up feeling into that beauty of sound ! There, at least, the emotional side of her nature might have a legitimate outlet : her music could hurt nobody. She did not know at the time how much her interest in playing was increased by Gustave’s presence. It was only afterwards, in the loneliness of the west-country home, that she realised that even this day of parting had retained some of the glamour of the happiness which had made every moment of Bayreuth so fully vital with the sensation of joy, and

that, in comparison to the days that were to follow, this day too was alive with entrancing interest. When the contrast of the past with the present filled that present with a yearning ache, music only made such pain unendurably acute.

While she played, the atmosphere got somewhat cleared of the reserve which the lovers had felt towards each other since their conversation in the morning alone together. She could speak to him more directly through the sounds of music than she dared to in words. When the *Andante* was finished, Gustave said, 'Now, will you play the things you played the first time I heard you, from the "Albumblätter," the *Schlummerlied*, *der Dichte Spricht*—just as you played them that day?'

Without answering she began. Lena could play—she could command the sound so that it spoke out the meaning of the story she was feeling; and she was then feeling that the moments were passing, bringing that wretched moment nearer which would close the chapter of the last fortnight—the short chapter that contained the sum of all the positive earthly happiness which had been allotted to her in this life. All the pathos of her sorrow seemed to creep

through her touch into the sound : she felt strong with excited exaltation. She played supremely well—beautifully ! Constance looked at Lord Brampton, and both gave a little nod of surprised approbation : words hardly seemed the appropriate medium in which to express satisfaction, much less applause ; so there was silence. When Schumann's poet had sung his last note, then Lena stood up, and without moving away from the piano, and looking straight in front of her, said with more assurance than was her wont—almost commandingly : ' I should like to go and see the Apostle Church once again. Will you go with me, Constance ? '

' The very thing I wanted to do with you ; I want to see the exact spot the artist painted your picture from, so as to recognise every line of it when you show me your picture at home ; and a walk would not be at all a bad thing before being cooped up in a railway carriage all night. We had better all go.'

' May I ? ' Gustave asked Lena.

' Yes,' she answered, with a restless excitement in her eye ; ' I wanted to go and look at it again with you.' She felt too solemn to be shy. That evening she meant that the final

good-bye should be said. It was to be final in every sense; she could rely on her own strength in the future. She felt she owed a debt to Gustave, and the only way she could pay it was to do all in her power to enable him to forget her and find fresh happiness in loving some one else. But till they parted that evening the moments were hers; he was hers. She did not speak, but did not avoid walking alone with him. They walked quickly, and reached the Apostle Church some minutes before Constance, Sir Bernard, and Lord Brampton.

‘It was here you stood when I first saw you;’ and Gustave’s quick eyes spotted the exact place.

‘It is all different,’ said Lena, looking up at the church and sky, and speaking with disappointed impatience; ‘there is no light in the sky behind.’

He did not answer, and they both stood together silent. They were looking up at the church, but hardly knew what they were seeing. They stood still,—so still, conscious only of each other’s nearness. So had it been at Bayreuth;—ah! often: a trance of joy steeping the moments, as if all possible good things

were the only meaning of life, and must be their inevitable portion. Now, it was more like a trance of despair: no future to that sense of possession each had in each; the parting wrench so near at hand; and, after it,—nothing in life but loneliness and emptiness.

Familiar voices approaching behind them broke the spell. Gustave looked down on Lena; with a weird attempt at a smile he said:

‘It is the same to me; even the same grey cloak, the same grey hat, and’—his eye wandered over the lines of her face and figure—‘the same everything.’

Lena’s lips quivered, her pale face became very white, and she moved back to meet Constance.

‘If you stand exactly there, where I was, you will see my picture, the church; but the sky is quite different, so grey and shut in.’

Her voice was almost hard as she spoke. No one said much, and after a few minutes they walked back to the hotel all together.

The last preparations for the journey completed, the five friends dined together alone, late, in the room upstairs. Gustave’s voice, as well as Lena’s, had quite dropped out of

the conversation ; they both felt that everything now seemed to be passing in a hurried dream. The dinner, then Sir Bernard settling the bill with his courier, then the announcement the carriage was ready ; everything went on before them, and the moments were slipping away—the precious last moments—and they were making no use of them. Lena felt stupefied, and only caught hold of little fragments of what was being said. She was conscious of hearing Sir Bernard say to Lord Brampton, as he came in with an overcoat on and his hat in his hand : ‘Why, Brampton, you going to see us off ! I thought you never did such things.’

‘My dear fellow, I rather like doing what I am expected never to do ; I shan’t be in your way, shall I ?’

‘No, no ; do come !’ Constance said eagerly ; ‘and, of course, you will too,’ turning to Gustave.

Away they rattled over the rough, bumping stones of the narrow street, across the Platz, and into the station. The servants were waiting, and hurried them along the platform to the carriage.

‘Well, good-bye, Lord Brampton. Come to

us as soon as you can when we get back from Scotland,' Constance said. 'And thank you for giving us a new friend—such a good friend as Mr. Allbretcht;' and she turned and shook poor Gustave warmly by the hand, then mounted quickly the high step into the carriage.

'Bernard, would you kindly move my bag? they've put it on the wrong side,' she called out from the further end.

'Can I help?' asked Lord Brampton, following Sir Bernard into the depths of the red velvet cavern; and Gustave and Lena were left standing alone together.

Constance had doubtless been right in spreading the parting over a whole day, in trying to bring into the relations between them something of the gentleness of friendship as the last recollection; in thinking it better for the future that the light should flicker out slowly instead of being extinguished suddenly in one interview: but the final moment had to come, and there it was. The air around that they breathed seemed to ache with the pain of it,—that sharp pain aggravated almost to despair in Lena by the consciousness that it was her decision which was hurting

him ; and moreover the consciousness that he thought her wrong in having made such a decision. She longed again to ask him to forgive her ; but a dry, choking feeling in her throat made it impossible for her to utter. The guards of the train began to fuss ; Lord Brampton appeared descending cautiously down from the carriage backwards, and passed by to speak to the guard. Lena then put out her hand, still ungloved. Gustave took it and clasped it tightly, with a nervous, feverish grasp. A moment after and she was in her seat, the door slammed-to by a grumbling official, and the long train began to move forwards away from the spot on the platform where they parted. Gustave, motionless, stood there ; Lena, sitting backwards, could still see him for a few seconds more. The strong light hanging above him cast a shadow over his eyes, but Lena felt they were fixed on hers. Just before losing sight of him she saw Lord Brampton come up and put his arm within Gustave's. A little pang of pain struck Lena's heart ;—it was left for another to comfort him ! She hated herself ; still, the pang struck. His old friend would have him ! He had been hers only for a fortnight ! She would be soon

what such quickly passing happiness must be—but a faint light of the past in the midst of a present, real, and active working life, in which she had no place! It wanted but that thought to complete the hardship of her sacrifice.

Then, as the train puffed out from under the station, a great sweep of white steam hid everything. With growing speed, out they tore, faster and faster into the darkness—and it was all over!

PART III

God's in His Heaven ; all's right with the world.

ROBERT BROWNING.

For life, with all it yields
And hope and fear,
Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love—
How love might be, hath been indeed, and is.

ROBERT BROWNING.

Enfin je te disais donc que, comme les émotions ont tant de charmes, on devrait les chercher là où tout est réel, là où l'on voit que l'invisible est beaucoup plus vrai que le visible.—*Récit d'une Sœur.*

MRS. CRAVEN.

CHAPTER XV

Do the work that's nearest,
Though it's dull at whiles—
Helping when you meet them
Lame dogs over stiles.

THE old vicarage at High Mallet is a cottage-like home with thatched roof and lattice windows; but the rough-cast walls are dignified by good Ham-stone work round the doorway and windows. A stone niche set in the wall above the door, filled by the carved figure of a bishop, mitre on head and crosier in hand, marks it as an ecclesiastical abode. The house stands but a few yards back from the village road, where the little bit of flower-garden in front is bordered by a paling and a little gate opposite the front door. Everything is small, and dates from the time when the manor-houses were as a rule more the size of our present farm-houses, and the rectories and vicarages the size of our cottages. Mr. St. John did not want more than a cottage to live in, his habits of living being of the

simplest ; but he did want something big for his music. So when he first took possession of the vicarage he had converted a large barn which stood behind the house on one side into a music-room, and one in which he could also hold his classes.

One October afternoon, nearly three months after her return from Germany, Lena opened the little gate and knocked at the vicarage door. Her dress was as usual a grey one, and, though warmed by the afternoon sun, which shone full on the garden and house, looked sober and rather melancholy in colour among the autumn flowers: the splashes of brilliant colour flaring with an almost reckless abandonment as if to make the most of the weeks—might be days—before the first frost blackened and shrivelled their beauty. Like scarlet fire glowed the single dahlias and gladiola; even the damask china-roses and Michaelmas daisies shone out fervent in colour against the old grey cloak so well known to all who knew Lena, and which had become to herself a treasure full of associations. Mr. St. John opened the door himself. Lena put out her hand, and said rather abruptly, ‘ Mr. St. John, I want you to help me.’

'Come in, Miss Lena ; come in and tell me how.'

'May we go into your music-room?'

'Of course,' was his answer, leading the way through the passage out through the back.

The house, Lena felt, was so tiny there could be no real seclusion in it,—the kitchen and the old housekeeper in it were so imminently close upon the little sitting-room ; but out away in the large space of the music-room there was the encouraging remoteness which she felt she needed before she could say what she wanted to say to Mr. St. John. He shut the door, but neither he nor Lena sat down.

'Well, how can I help you?' he asked.

'I want something to do, Mr. St. John—something with my hands and mind at the same time. I want to get tired—tired out: I can't sleep ; and I am getting frightened. I don't want to worry George ; I am quite well, but I cannot sleep, and it is because I never feel tired out.'

Mr. St. John was standing beside Lena, leaning back against a table, his hands clasping the edge. He shot a quick, searching glance round at her, and his prominent brow

was contracted for a second as if by a sudden spasm of alarm. Then he looked down on the floor, and said quietly, 'Why not work hard at thoroughbass? I told you you ought to long ago. You do not know the A B C of it properly yet. And music is your line. You ought to do really great things; you have got it in you.'

'No, I can't do music now,' said Lena bluntly. She always felt she could steer nearer the wind with Mr. St. John than with any one else. He never asked inconvenient questions. As Constance once said, he was far too mysterious about himself to dare to be inquisitive about any one else.

'I thought, perhaps, geology would do?' Lena said rather tentatively.

Mr. St. John looked up and smiled. 'There are all the ologies. Why geology in particular?'

'Because you care for it and know so much about it.'

A gentle, almost shy look, softened the expression of Mr. St. John's usually steely, unresponsive eye.

Lena went on, not noticing it, however. She seemed to be thinking of things beyond

his presence. 'There seems so little reason for doing anything if you can't point it to an interest in common with some human being. George and I read books together, and'—with a sort of weary sigh—'we get through such a number! though that is only in the evening. But there is the whole day when he is out. I want something to do out of doors, to take me a long way and get tired over.'

'Yes, but winter is before us,' Mr. St. John replied. 'It would never do for you to be about in this damp country geologising for hours together. It would be too risky. You are not strong enough.'

'What could I do?' and Lena looked drearily before her. 'I feel any kind of natural history that I could work at hard and forget everything else over, if it were only for two hours a day, might help.'

'I will try and think of something,' Mr. St. John said, more gently than it was his wont to speak. His manner and the tone of his voice were generally dry and very matter-of-fact. Even the kind of cheerfulness which he often assumed was felt as very unsympathetic by some, and was resented by a few of his parishioners. It seemed to imply a snub,

especially for those who wore their troubles on their sleeves. But Lena he had ever treated differently. Hers was a kindred spirit to his own. She had pluck, she had dignity, she bore her burdens without complaining. They must be indeed very heavy, and probably involving George's happiness, for her to speak even as she was speaking to him now. Though unconscious of Lena's experiences while in Germany—for she had hardly spoken to him even of the music at Bayreuth—he felt something had happened which had agitated her in a new way, had made her older, her countenance more beautiful, but which had made the former troubles all the more difficult to bear. He knew only too well what was wanting in her life, poor child. He knew that now that the anxiety and wearing strain on her nerves were removed as daily difficulties to be met and fought through, her young nature, so full of sensibility and feeling though so quiet and undemonstrative, must feel almost to distraction the loneliness and barrenness of the life it was her lot to lead. He was sufficiently, also, a student of human nature to know how inadequate any of the 'ologies' would be to meet the difficulty.

He repeated, after a few minutes' silence, 'I will try and think of something.' Then he added, straightening himself, and with a kind of conclusive sigh, 'Life is not easy.'

'But it has to be lived,' Lena said quickly, almost impatiently, and striking her foot down firmer on the floor, 'it must be gone through; George must not be left alone.'

There was a pause, then:

'We can none of us spare you,' Mr. St. John said shortly, in a low voice, which would have sounded brusque had it not been accompanied by a very shy manner.

Lena had had a very bad time of it during the ten weeks which had elapsed since her return from Germany. George had been kindness itself, according to his powers of kindness. That fortnight, which started out of the depressed monotony of her normal life like a gleam of sunlight striking down from a slit in the clouds, illuminating vividly one spot in a dreary stretch of wide-spreading grey landscape—that fortnight seemed to have changed somewhat their mutual relationship. She felt more as if they were contemporaries. Whatever difference between their ages still existed, he seemed no longer so much the

elder brother. Had they not both suffered alike in their most inner personal experience? Had they not both fully learnt the meaning of the iron entering into the soul? But still, between the brother and sister existed the habit of reserve which those belonging to the same family, and living together, so often fall into, and which is, perhaps, of all reserves the most difficult to break down. Moreover, George's nature was a silent nature. It was a great effort to him to speak on any really intimate questions, and almost an impossibility for him even to refer to those which concerned his own feelings. A word or two only had passed with reference to Gustave Allbretcht; but not one single allusion to his own love episode. Lena knew that by a kindly tenderness in his manner towards her George meant to express his sympathy with her; but now for the first time she fully recognised how fundamental was the difference in their two natures. As she recognised that she was more fully grown-up since her experiences at Bayreuth, she knew, consequently, that that emotional power which her nature possessed was no childish weakness. She had never traced a sign of it in George, and she

had hitherto supposed it to be so. She knew now, not only that it brought with it a greater capacity for joy and for pain, but that to possess it meant to be more fully and truly alive as a human being. This knowledge did not make her love and respect for George the less: on the contrary, she felt a new wonder and admiration for him. How could he have gone on so steadily and monotonously leading his ordinary dull life through such trouble! Still, she felt there was a difference in their two natures, and it was a difference it was impossible to get rid of. It was Gustave, and Gustave alone, who had in every way met, enriched, and responded to her own nature. She had been shown a heaven upon earth, and she had thrust it aside of her own free will, with her own decision. But a thousand times more difficult was it to live out worthily the results of that decision than it had been to make it. Many a time, as she thought how worthily George had hidden every sign of weakness, did she wish she had work, a business to go to every day, people dependent on her to work for. Men had such advantages over women!

On first reaching home she flew to her

picture. But, ah! it was no longer in that sky of light she looked for comfort, but in every line of the building. Each touch of the darkly, heavily painted church had an interest as intense as it was new! And there also was the very ground on which she stood when she turned and first met his eyes fixed on hers; and there they had stood that last day—still, so still, conscious only of the other's nearness! The worst of it all was she did not want to forget. Do what she might, she could not bring herself genuinely to desire to obliterate from her memory all that had made up the only active joy of her life. But how were things to go on? She dared not wish to die; George would be too lonely without her; and yet she could not get rid of the spell which made her live over and over again that past which poisoned the now, and left her always with the same hopeless, longing ache. She tried to begin her music, but she shut up her piano very quickly again. What was the use of arousing emotions which, when aroused, turned her chronic pain into an acute pain? It was never a question with Lena as to fulfilling or not fulfilling the obvious duties of life. Her nature met them as inevitable necessities,

but they seemed now to have become but the bare outline of life, and to leave all the meaning to be filled in; and what was there in herself left with which to fill in this bare outline, without her love for Gustave? When all the day's work was done; when she had done all for George that George wanted; when she had done all in the house that the house wanted; when she had visited all the poor people in the village who wanted to be visited, there was still a superabundance of self left that wanted feeding—and not only feeding, but also some field to expand itself in. Virtue as yet was certainly a very inadequate reward to Lena for having chosen the narrow, difficult road; moreover she felt if she ever hardened into indifference about the one feeling which had so peremptorily caught hold of her whole nature, it would be at the expense of that whole nature hardening too.

The twenty-four hours were long, very long; for the nights were almost as wakeful as the days, and in their stillness and silence worse to get through. Then the invisible was truly more real than the visible. She would wake up after a first short sleep, and in the absolute quiet of the night, without her con-

scious intention, a scene, when Gustave and she had been together, would come vividly before her, as if she were there and then living in it. At other times she would find—to her terror—that her memory seemed to have lost hold of his outward general appearance, and she could only recall the look of his eyes as they pierced her through and through. Constance had brought her from Nuremberg an old hanging lamp in wrought-iron. Lena had put the scrolled bracket which was part of it on the wall by the side of her picture, so that when the lamp was lit she could see the Apostle Kirche and the evening sky at night even better than she could by daylight. She would often get up and light the lamp; there was a certain satisfaction in looking at anything so real as even the picture; and it seemed to rest her brain to look definitely at something, for her brain, without her will, would go on so endlessly recalling what she felt she ought to forget. It was these nights that made her most frightened, and she had passed through many of them before she made up her mind to speak to Mr. St. John.

There was an old woman living in High

Mallett who was a notable character, known as 'Old Jenny.' Perhaps of all her occupations visiting bed-ridden Old Jenny was the one which took Lena most out of herself. Jenny was an instance of wonderful vitality. She was very, very old. She had had a good-for-nothing husband and fifteen children. Most of the boys were rascals; most of the girls highly unsatisfactory. She had been bed-ridden for ten years, and was so poor that she could buy barely the necessaries, much less the comforts, of life. Still, she was not on the parish; she paid her rent, and she ate enough to go on living. And she was a shrewd and keen-sighted old woman. She saw Lena was in trouble, and felt, too, that it was some special trouble, but put it down to some extra difficulty there might be in Mrs. Prevost's state. She would say, 'And have you heard lately how the poor missus is? You have a lot of trouble, surely, for one as young and gentle-looking. Well, but Lord! we're all born to trouble, as the sparks fly upwards. That's what Mr. St. John says, and it's true, and I've found it so. But there! What's the use of making the worst of things? It only adds one more, and the biggest of all, to

the troubles; and no one wants that as has got real troubles. I says always, it's only them as has fancy troubles as can indulge 'emselves in grumbling.'

'Brave Jenny!' Lena would say, and would reproach herself over and over again as she left the cottage, comparing Jenny's courageous happy temper with her own sad, restless condition. But then,—Jenny had lived a full life—full to brimming over, and, though so troublous, a human life. Whereas she had had all her capacities for living a human life stunted, and her nature sent back to feed and rot upon itself.

As a climax to all the disjointedness in Lena's life at this time, the neighbours began to call. While Mrs. Prevost lived at home, her peculiarities were considered a sufficient reason for George's very consistent discouragement of any advances towards sociability with his neighbours. But now that the brother and sister were left alone, the said neighbours began to say among themselves that it would be kind to do something for that poor lonely girl Miss Prevost. At least, that was the way they put it. But what really first suggested such an idea was that Lady Lovat had made

a real friend of Lena, and had taken her abroad with her. Lady Lovat had reminded them of her existence, and Lena could not have been introduced to their memories by a more eligible association.

The Lovats could not be many months at Mallett Court in the year ; but when they were there Constance did her duty by the neighbourhood in the same efficient, generous, brilliant sort of way in which she carried on all her business in life. She did not make it an event distinguished by its rarity for the neighbours to go to Mallett Court, but distinguished because there the best company, the prettiest garden, and the most generous sharing in the good things of life all round were showered alike on the small and the great people. Her distinguished London guests were not allowed to rest lazily on a dais of superiority solely to enjoy each other's society, but had to make things more amusing and interesting for the small country importations ; and these in the sunny atmosphere of Constance's personality became often as good company as the great magnates themselves. Constance had the power, because the courage, to make people do as she wished ;

for she had faith in her own social creeds, and the creed which she believed in and forced others to follow as far as she could, was, that the only right reason for people herding together socially was to make themselves as pleasant as they could to one another. And this creed and the manner in which it was carried out made Mallett Court more and more the place people wanted to go to; and Lena, through her friendship with Constance, very unconsciously became an object of interest possessed of a position as an entity of a second-hand kind.

Lady Massinger, the biggest neighbour, was provoked with Constance for having taken Lena abroad with her. Why, she did not reason out to herself; but were there not Augusta, Mary, Elizabeth, and Susan Massinger, who would have delighted in going abroad with Constance Lovat and had not been taken? And though Lady Massinger was too well conditioned in theory to allow herself consciously to indulge in envy, and had too vague and hazy a mind to know that she was doing so, she did feel that old friends, such as the Lovats and Massingers had been for generations, ought to be thought of before

a new acquaintance, and a girl, moreover, not even in their own set! Nevertheless, Lady Massinger made up her mind to call on Lena Prevost. She was curious to know what sort of a person Lena was. Constance herself was an object of a mild and not wholly ill-natured envy to Lady Massinger. In the first place, her lord had, she considered, an exaggerated admiration for Constance—but that did not so much matter. Lady Massinger had been a handsome and was now a stately matron, though too large for grace. She had had quite as much admiration as her nature desired or her many occupations, in fulfilling her duties in her grand station of life, gave her time to receive. So the personal charms of Constance as a woman, though much admired by Lord Massinger, did not excite her envy cruelly. But to Mallett Court people seemed to care to go more than to her own stately castle. Lady Massinger was a good wife and mother, and desired to give the best of chances to her daughters and an amusing home to her boys. She was curious to find what it was that made Mallett Court so popular. She was rather curious about everything Constance did, and so it came to pass she became curious to know

Lena, whom Constance had taken under her wing as such an intimate friend. Consequently, one afternoon she, accompanied by a daughter, called on Lena. The visit was a very short one. There seemed nothing on which a mutual interest could be struck up. Even Bayreuth, handled by Lady Massinger, suggested the remote and the commonplace.

‘Did you not go abroad with Lady Lovat?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ Lena had answered; ‘we went to Germany to hear Wagner’s music at Bayreuth.’

‘Ah, I had a niece who went with some friends to Bayreuth; but if I remember rightly I do not think they thought it very good. I think they said the singers were all too fat, and that spoilt the effect.’

‘Good heavens!’ mentally ejaculated Lena, ‘what a strange view of Bayreuth!’

‘Did you enjoy it?’ asked the daughter.

Lena hesitated. Had she enjoyed Bayreuth? ‘Oh, yes,’ she added, feeling confused; ‘it was very wonderful, I thought.’

‘You play the music, I suppose,’ Lady Massinger said, with an idea that she had not perhaps said the right thing about Bayreuth. ‘My niece paints; she is not musical; that

makes a difference. She went to hear this music because her friends were going. It's so nice for young people to do things together.'

'What do you like to play best of Wagner's?' the daughter asked Lena. She was the pianist in the Massinger family, and had accordingly been the one chosen to call upon Lena with her mother.

'I have never played any of his music,' Lena had answered.

'Really,' exclaimed Lady Massinger to her lord on returning to her castle, 'what anybody, much less a clever woman like Constance Lovat, can see in that Miss Prevost to make such a fuss about, and why she should be taken up out of her own set, beats me completely, Massinger. But there! it's just like Constance Lovat: she does seem to take such a special pleasure in doing out-of-the-way, peculiar things; and because it's she who does them, they must be right.'

'Ah!' Lord Massinger answered, always the most domestic and moral of husbands, 'you do not understand Constance Lovat, my dear Evelina, because you are jealous of her. But you really must let me enjoy the privileges of my age, and one of the pleasantest I have is

the chronic flirtation existing between that brightest of creatures and myself.'

'Oh, don't be so silly, Massinger,' his lady said with a good-humoured, matter-of-fact petulance: 'as if any one would think of really flirting with you at your age! You may put it down to jealousy or any other nonsense you like. It is Constance Lovat's way to do peculiar things, and then people think there is something very wonderful about her. There are a number of girls in her own set who, of course, would be really more of companions to her, if she wanted a girl to help her; but no, she must needs fish out this Miss Prevost to take abroad and to Bayreuth (you know where Edith went to hear that German's operas); and actually, though the point of Miss Prevost is that she plays well on the piano, she told us she had not played any of the music! I daresay Constance Lovat has turned her head and made her forget all her ordinary occupations.'

So, from the impression which poor Lena made on Lady Massinger, she was not considered by her as a person who justified her privileges. Visits such as Lady Massinger's made Lena feel her real loneliness the more.

How far away out of that sociable, neighbour's life she felt herself—how impossible it would be, and how little did she wish to be nearer it, or to become part of it!

Near the end of September a letter came from Constance saying Lord Brampton had joined them in Scotland. Then the letter went on to say: 'He left Gustave Allbretcht hard at work, and thinks probably he is doing something quite first-rate—for he would see no one, and had grown so silent that even Lord Brampton could hardly get anything out of him. Perhaps I ought not to repeat this to you, but I know if I were you I should like to hear it.'

Lena clutched the letter tightly and kissed it eagerly. 'Dear Constance!' she said half-aloud. This created the first feeling of real pleasure she had felt since her return. She ought to have hated herself for that pleasure. She ought not to want to remain part of his life. It was horribly selfish of her; but how could she help it when the meaning of her whole life seemed to have passed over to his keeping? She meant honestly to wish him to forget her, and repeated this over and over again to herself to try and make it real; but real it had

not yet become, and her revived spirits as she read Constance's letter proved it was not real. So the days and weeks passed, till she felt something must be done—she must get out of herself; and she sought Mr. St. John to help her.

The day after her visit to him the bright weather changed and downpouring rain fell. What was she to do with herself this afternoon? she thought, looking out of the window across the fields half-hidden by the sheets of wind-battered rain flying in steely gusts across them. It was three o'clock; George would not be back till six, and the morning had more than sufficed for every occupation indoors she could possibly think of. Then, as she gazed out, with surprise she saw Mr. St. John coming with difficulty up the path on the rise of the field towards the house, struggling through the rain. He was holding something precious, and trying to cover it with his wind-battered umbrella and waterproof which was flying and whirling about unmanageably in the gusts. As he neared the house Lena went to the door herself to open it.

‘What have you got, Mr. St. John? Is it alive?’

He was treating the object in his hands very reverently.

‘No, Miss Lena; it’s the microscope. I want you to look at some things through it. I have got them in a bottle in my pocket. I fished them out of a very dirty pond, and they are quite wonderful.’

‘Oh, I should very much like to see them,’ was all Lena said.

Between these two very few words were ever necessary. Lena felt none the less grateful. She knew how precious the microscope was to its owner, and how he was offering of his best, bringing it through such deluging rain to try and cheer the loneliness of the long, wet afternoon. And the things out of the dirty pond were very wonderful, and the two hours they spent over the microscope were very pleasant as things went. If only Mr. St. John would have talked things out more! Lena thought, after he had left her. But there seemed always something which would remind him, when he was just on the point of talking really interestingly, that he must keep up a reserve. Then she remembered how refreshing it had been to hear Gustave talk things out naturally and fully that first evening

they had spent together at Cologne, though his audience were strangers to him. But here—George was so reserved, Mr. St. John was so reserved, she felt so reserved herself. Everything was so pent-up and inarticulate. If only Constance would come!—she was not reserved. But Constance was not coming to Mallett Court at all that winter. The doctors had ordered Sir Bernard as much of Scotland as he could take before the House met, and no Somersetshire. His measles had left him with a cough, and he was to be braced and not exposed to the damp of the west.

The rain fell day after day—torrents of rain; and through the torrents Mr. St. John would come whenever he could spare a couple of hours from his parish, with fresh wonders from the dirty pond and elsewhere to while away the time for Lena till, as he said, he had succeeded in thinking of something for her to work at steadily.

CHAPTER XVI

PARTED PRESENCE

Love, I speak to your heart,
Your heart that is always here :
Oh, draw me deep to its sphere
Though you and I are apart ;
And yield, by the spirit's art,
Each distant gift that is dear,
O love, my love, you are here.

DANTE G. ROSSETTI.

ONE morning, at last, the sun broke out gloriously, and the inhabitants of High Mallett and Islebarton woke up to see, instead of the moors, a world of water below them. The floods had burst through the banks and wide-spreading lakes stretched away for miles and miles, leaving the higher ridges like hilly islands in their midst. The post came in after breakfast at Islebarton, just in time for George to take his letters with him into the town. Lena was looking out of the window when it arrived that morning. The new aspect of the landscape with the water out was refreshing,

and the sunshine glistening on the moisture still bedewing the trees and the grass was, spite of everything, reviving. The happiness of sunshine is irresistible, especially when it bursts out after days of grey dreariness and rain.

George was gathering up his letters from the tray on which the servant had brought them in. 'Then, dear, you know I can't be back till latish to-morrow, by the 6.20 train. Good-bye,' he said, turning round to kiss her. He was going that morning to Bath on business, and was to sleep there the following night.

As he left the room, the maid came to Lena tray in hand. A letter lay upon it directed to her in rather a scrawly handwriting, bearing a foreign stamp and post-mark. She took it up with a wondering interest, and, sitting down near the window, opened it. There was no ordinary beginning; she hastily turned over to the end—'G. A.' was the signature. Her heart leapt up with a bound and then seemed to stop beating. She felt breathless, but, folding the letter up quietly, left the room, where the maid was busy clearing the breakfast away, and with her knees tottering under her went upstairs to her room, turning the key

as she shut the door. Sitting down opposite her picture on a sofa at the bottom of her bed, she unfolded the letter. She hardly took in the meaning of the words as her eyes read them the first time :

‘ You told me I was not to write to you or see you again. I disobey you, and have no excuse to give but that I cannot help doing so. Nothing has happened, you will say, that justifies my not obeying your wishes. Yes ; this has happened : three months have passed since we parted. You twice alluded to the fact that we had only been a fortnight together, and that, therefore, what happened in that fortnight could more easily be forgotten than had we been longer together. I hardly know to whom I am writing : whether to the same Lena whom I knew during that fortnight or to another who has successfully schooled herself into indifference about me. It makes me hardly know myself not to know this. Everything is wretched and uncertain in consequence. I cannot work. I can do nothing but try and make certain to my mind what has become uncertain. It is not only regret—though a thousand times I repeat I think your decision was a wrong one—but a horrid fiend

takes possession of me. It says, "Had she known what it was really to love you, could she have done it?" I know it is selfish to write and ask you, even in my thoughts to wish you, to be otherwise than indifferent: but you must forgive me, dear child, for it means everything to me that has any meaning at all in life, to know whether I am right or wrong in thinking—setting aside all human complications, catastrophes, and responsibilities which you think ought to govern our actions—to know whether we are in reality of soul still one. Understand me, I am not daring to suggest a plea for happiness—I accepted and accept your decision—I can do without happiness; but this uncertainty is torture, and unbearable. Three months have passed, and you are a thousand times more mine than when we parted. Tell me in very pity whether you have changed or not. I need not urge you to tell me the truth, for, however cruel it may look as you write it, you *could* never say otherwise than what was true. Tell me whether, though we may never see each other again, I belong to you as you belong to me—till death us do part.—G. A.'

Lena read this three times, then she looked

up. Pale, motionless she sat, seeing nothing before her. A bright light was in her eye, her lips were parted. Her very inner soul seemed to be kindled into light and to shine through her unseeing gaze. She sat, not knowing how the time went—not knowing anything but that real life had come back to her. Presently the servant turned the handle of the door, not knowing that Lena was in the room. Then she started, folded up her letter, and unlocked the door. She had promised old Jenny a visit that morning and to take her some soup. She shut her eyes for a moment to think the better. First, she must do everything in the house that had to be done; then she must go and see Jenny; and then—and then read her letter again. Ah! when would she be able to answer it? Not certainly till that wild excitement was calmed—excitement that was making every reality about her seem unreal, all swept away by that one sheet of thin paper, every word written on it burning into her, kindling afresh her power of happiness.

As the day wore on the wind got up, bringing grey clouds from the west which soon covered in the bright sky. In the afternoon all sunshine had vanished. It was not till

then that Lena felt herself quite free. She did not hurry over her duties ; on the contrary, she tried to exhaust them very thoroughly, so that nothing should trespass on her solitude when she had earned it. But then, when every duty she could think of was finished, she went up into her room and read her letter again.

She sat for a moment still, then with a light, quick movement sprang up, opened her cupboard, unhooked the well-known grey cloak, put on her hat, and went out. She passed out of the garden gate in front of the house on to the high road, and walked quickly against the wind in the direction away from the town. When she had gone a little more than a mile she turned off from the road and passed through a field into a wide grass avenue of mighty forest trees. It was not raining, but

'Wild west wind, thou breath of autumn's being,'

made everything seem alive and in movement. The sky was spotted by black rooks, flapping and swooping wildly round the tops of the highest trees, or, when stopping their flight to rest, with stiffened, widespread wings against the gale, like anchored boats in a storm-tossed sea, rocked to and fro in the low and drifting

clouds. The gusts rushed through the branches of the trees, tearing away and sweeping along with them the fading autumn leaves,

‘Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
Pestilence-stricken multitudes.’

These gusts were not harsh nor exhausting, only bracing and exhilarating. They were not ruthless and incessant, taking the breath away, but came eventfully and at intervals.

Every word in Gustave's letter clinging to her mind, and her fingers clenching the paper itself in safety low down in her pocket, Lena bravely faced the wind, her grey cloak curving and sweeping sail-like about her as she firmly walked on through the avenue and passed on to a wide open space round a high pillar monument, the relic of former times and history.

A strangely interesting, solitary place, teeming with the history and associations of vivid lives in the past, now absolutely remote from and forsaken by the active life of the present, given over to a few rustics and their cattle, and the wide-breathing Nature which has her way so uninterruptedly for so many miles into the Devonshire distance. Echoing still with the splendour, the extravagance, the wreck and demolishment of the

Chatham reign, these now solitary hill-sides give an impression of an almost classic solemnity, so great is the contrast between the memories of former grandeur, the revelries by night and junketing by day, and the present deserted loneliness. Few associations of the wreck and ruin of a human home were ever linked with a grander, statelier scene in nature. Curving back boldly inland from the hill promontory on which the column stands, the hill-sides, clothed with splendid timber, sweep down to the flattest of level moor. Planted originally as rare specimens, the trees have mostly grown into tangled masses of wood. From one of these, half-hidden, purple in the solemn shadow of black cedars, peeps out in a deserted, melancholy way the only remaining wing of the once vast, rambling mansion. Below this last remnant lay the broad sweep of turf on which wild Lady Hester Stanhope galloped and raced with all the good lively company and guests. All that Lena saw, however, below the hills on that October afternoon was a vast waste of waters flooding the flat moors for miles and miles away out into the distance. Out of the waters rose, like an amphitheatre on an immense

scale, the hills which divide on each side the moors from the sea of the two Channels, closed round in the far distance by ridges of Devonshire high land.

She passed by the column over the brow of the hill, out, down on to the edge of a bold spur of the ridge sentinelled by a group of tall, wind-battered firs. Aloft from their height the squared branches strike fearlessly out into the air: but below, roots that start out of the turf are clawed back by the hill-side in twisted angles and fantastic curves. The hill shoots straight down from this clump of trees into a meadow-land sloping gently away into the level moor. And here, on this edge by the firs, Lena paused.

A sudden impulse had made her seek this spacious loneliness, where there seemed no confining or restraining limit, as a spot where she could best think out how to answer Gustave's letter. Here, she thought, she might perhaps better realise the true proportion of things, and try at all events to conceive that this love, seemingly so tumultuously overpowering, was not the only thing in life. She must make her best endeavour, out of that excitement and reawakened sense of life, to

extract some power which would give unselfish help. But how was she to do it? Not for one moment had she thought it possible to change her decision; but the words in this letter she was clasping so tightly made sensation, not thought or conscience, uppermost and overwhelming, and made her feel that the conflict would have to be fought through again. Gustave did not ask her to change her decision—he did not plead for happiness. All the more did it hurt Lena to think that she could not give it him. Strangely pathetic to her ever strong sense of pity was the feeling that one older than herself by many years, so much her superior in every way, should be clinging to the memory of love from so small a creature as she felt herself to be, as the best thing in his life. ‘The pity of it, oh, the pity of it!’ was there again, quite fresh to sting. The might-have-been, the possibility of such happiness, was all realised afresh, and had to be confronted and resisted. And how confronted and resisted alone?

Not as before, in the exciting presence of her love, every nerve still thrilling with the sense of that great music which had steeped both their natures to the full with power

of delight—not when life seemed all tuned to the heroic and the sacrifice was surrounded by a glamour of highly strung sensation: not as before had the contest to be fought. No; it was now in the quiet, sober monotony of her home life, when memory had given her love a far more abiding and tenderer hold upon her constant nature than had even his presence: in the solitude of this rustic west-country life, sweet, soothing, inspiring even to the poet perhaps, but very insufficient in vividness of interest to the woman's nature which had been shown and offered its earthly paradise, and had turned away from it as joy too bright and beautiful for its destiny. How much greater seemed the contrast now between that might-have-been and that must-be than it had been before she had lived the home life weighted with that realised sense of what happiness really meant, and the consciousness that such happiness could never, never be a part of that life! How much stronger now was the longing for the fuller life of love and art, now that she was starved, than it had been when for the first time she had had her nature satisfied with both!

But the sense of right and duty was not

in Lena an intentional, conscious choice ; it was the inevitable, unreasoned consequence of perceiving what the right was, a habit of loyally following the strong sense of truth within her, unbiassed by thought of self or self-interest. Never for one moment did it occur to her to waver since she had felt certain that in the rejection of the greatest earthly happiness that ever could be hers lay the rightest right ; but the sense of the contrast between such happiness and the life that would be hers without it, together with the physical exhilaration which all the wild, free nature surrounding her brought with it, created in Lena one of those moments of rare emotional excitement which had marked the most eventful days of her life. As she stood so lonely, the gusts of the west wind bracing and vivifying all sensation, and fanning the chronic, dull depression into an active excitement of pain, a sense of passionate reproach against her fate welled up in her heart, and burning tears of self-pity filled her eyes. A childlike, helpless despair came over her ; she felt at the end of herself ; she covered her face with her hands and gasped out through a sob, ' Oh, God help me ! '

CHAPTER XVII

‘ Il existe, même ici-bas, un bonheur plus complet que le plus complet bonheur de la terre, et un amour plus grand que son plus grand amour.’—*Récit d’une Sœur.*

CONSCIOUSNESS seemed for a few moments drowned in her feeling of hopelessness. It was reawakened by a sound high in the air, strange, far away. For the first moment it recalled to Lena that fluttering murmur of hundreds of strings which under the spell of Wagner’s genius breathed up such thrilling meanings from that caverned orchestra at Bayreuth. But this time the sound came from above, not from below. A mystic music it might be Lena thought as she listened, her hands still covering her face: coming from ‘behind the veil,’ moving, passing above her, whispering down some strange message as it floated along. Uncovering her face she looked up. A flight of hundreds of birds was flying across the sky. As a breeze will turn to music as it floats

through the strings of an *Æolian* harp, so were the rushing gusts of the wild west wind converted to a strange, unearthly music as they passed through the crowded feathered wings of these travellers of the air, hastening with quickened beats to a southern warmth. Fainter and fainter grew the sound as Lena watched, and further and further the crowded flight of quivering wings flying away through the high sky, soon becoming but a little grey, misty, quickly moving cloud, then a speck in the far-away distance only a hint darker than the sky.

As Lena lost sight of it, suddenly the grey, clouded world before her turned to brightness. The clouds had rolled up one over another from the distant line of western hills, leaving a broad band of clear, light sky-space above the horizon. Soon the sun itself, descending from behind the veil of clouds, travelled through the fiery space, the last stage of his journey before parting for the night from the beautiful world Lena saw before her. Each moment was shed more and more fervid light on all things in the heavens and on the earth, the burning rays scaling each rift of cloud and touching each edge with glowing gold—mounting higher

and higher and spreading wide into the vault of the great sky dome above her head—illuminating all that world of cloud, space, and water with a flood of warm, awakening life. All distinct outline of distance faded in the fervour of a golden haze ; but out of this fiery mist, from the far-off level of the flood, came in shining brilliancy a great roadway of rippling light, met and broken here and there by the rows of pollard willows sentinelled along the rhymes echoing their lines on the water in purple shadows behind them. These past, the widening tract of light broke out again and travelled onwards in dazzling sheen along the vast plain of waters, reaching at last the green incline below her. There, sobering into colour, it broke out like a smile spreading over the green rise of the meadows. On again, creeping up the steep hill-side to her feet, these touches of the sun flooded all things great and small with a rapture of glory : burning a golden glisten into every shining needle of the firs, scorching red fire on the scaled bark of their seared and weather-worn trunks, and bathing in a glow of softest gold the sward on the wide-spread hill-top. Lastly, the great trees around and behind her, draped in all the variety of

autumn garment, caught the sun-rays. With a brilliancy of enamel and jewels they glowed in vivid colour, in scarlet and orange, in purple and yellow, in transparent carmines, in mossy greens, in fervent russets. All breathed with an intenser life—the life of fullest colour and burning light. A miracle of blazing glory finished into perfect beauty by that veil of atmosphere which Mother Nature hangs on all her work ; that touch of quality tempering its fierce intensity and fervour with a spell-like charm of mellow, tender gentleness.

On the spur of the hill, so small a thing against the tall fir-trees, stood that slight and fragile human figure—but a pale, fluttering thread of grey in all the flood-tide and power of that big world of colour and space ; but no less like a miracle was the soul strength that was borne into her very being as she stood there in the loneliness of that hill-side, witnessing this great passionate outburst of beauty in nature. The sun dipped below the faint, far-off horizon ; the world sobered into quiet colour ; the woods lay shadowed in a solemn glow ; the fervour faded out of the light on cloud and water. The hushed wind seemed, with the sun, to have gone to rest. It became

almost dusk, when suddenly an after-glow, in a flood of pink light, flew back from the west. Crimson, yet more crimson, like the very heart of Love, the ruby light glowed fervently for a few moments; then, fading into rose, slowly, tenderly floated away, seeming to leave behind it some secret in the twilight.

Lena stood quite motionless till the faintest whisper of bright colour had flown. She had not been conscious of thinking at all since the moment when the pain of her despair had obliterated everything but itself; but as the last faint ruby tint died out of the evening gloom she awoke to a sense that something new had been borne in upon her consciousness. A power of freedom had come and released the pent-up pain and longing. The chain which had seemed to fasten her down to her own small self and its pain and longing seemed loosened, and she felt that in a sense she had become merged in that wider and more infinite nature whose beauty and grandeur she had been watching. How often had she recalled with wonder that moment at Bayreuth when the joy of her love for Gustave, her real awakened power of loving, had been borne into her consciousness! Music, so large a part of

her life, had stimulated and had helped to awaken that consciousness; now it would seem that the glory of colour and light had awakened her to a still deeper, higher sense of feeling. Colour, like music, can have the effect on those who feel strongly the power of its beauty, of satisfying a sense too vague to be called spiritual, but which by the pure excitement it creates leads on to the borderland of spiritual emotion. While the world lay before her steeped in such glory, a response to this glory was echoed in Lena's nature, and a desire created in her soul to feel in harmony with it. Whatever personal misery and misfortune might exist in the circumstances of life to depress it, was there not outside and above it all a large life in the spirit possible to all, even to the most unfortunate, which no circumstances, no incidents, no other human beings, could rob you of? That seemed the only worthy beauty humanity could claim, wherewith to respond to and harmonise with the blessings of beauty in nature, so generously showered on all by their Creator. Possible to all if once within the wide embrace of that Creator's love—that love of God, realised by so few whose human love is satisfied, but

which, when once realised, emancipates us from all the troubles of earthly love, leaving us only to feel its beauty and its blessings.

No help could ever have come to Lena which would have exiled her nature from its earthly love, for that she knew to be a very part of her fullest and best self ; but the lesser could be included in the greater, and, as that self could be merged in a larger, more infinite essence, so could her love for Gustave be given its true place as part of the blessings of that more infinite love. As this earthly happiness had been stimulated, perhaps, at its awakening by the excitement caused by music, doubtless this new spiritual sense had been stimulated partly by what are called physical emotions. The waft of that wild west wind passing by her cheek invigorated her very sense of being; and the effect of space and vastness, flooded by that everlasting wash of air and by the glowing treasure of beautiful colour, made every pulse beat with a fuller life. But though we may drink in such delights through the senses, the draught kindles often emotions which serve as inlets to the soul. Art, music, beauty to the eye, no less than pure love and friendship, can touch the spring which inspires us

with a sense of the existence of a wider horizon than that which surrounds our more material lives; and this sense of a wider horizon leads us to a higher sense of the true meaning of life, and in so doing liberates our smaller selves from the tyranny of self.

The sense of duty and faithfulness, those kinder and higher feelings which made self-sacrifice a pleasure, even a necessity, to Lena, had never been exercised consciously, or with direct intention, as a fulfilment of her sense of religion; but her love for Gustave, by awakening in her nature fresh sources of strength and feeling, made an inarticulate, undeveloped condition in any direction less possible. Now, at this moment, when all nature had burst out with such a sudden splendour upon her—when, in her despair, she had appealed to what had hitherto been but a vague though an acknowledged Power—the direct answer had come and filled her whole being with a satisfying response, and she felt her nature in direct communion with a higher Power. The light had arisen in her darkness. Her despair had been the culmination of the struggling effort of her own nature to be true to its best self—that self as moulded by the feelings, associations, and

duties of the past, as well as by those of the present; and with this culmination had come the relief—it might be called the joy—of submission to the higher Will which had ordained her conditions. That yearning longing for a happiness which her sense of right told her was not for her ceased with the feeling that it was not her own judgment, but a greater Will than her own, which had ruled the decision—for she could not, without outraging her sense of right, have decided otherwise; and that conscience, which had dictated the sense of right, had not been created by her own will, but had been given her by her Creator as a guide. If only her love—for, whatever happened, her love he would always be—could realise that resignation, and, as it were, active resignation, could alone sap out the venom from their sorrow; if he could only recognise that it was a mightier Power ruling their fate, not her choice and decision; then would it not be possible for them both still to live full, happy, joy-giving lives, though separated for ever in this world? Life in its entirety could not mean one passion, however strong and overwhelmingly necessary to happiness that one passion might appear; nor could such feelings continue to be beautiful and

worthy if they could not be merged into that larger love which was restricted by no purely personal emotion.

As Lena stood still gazing into that far and fading distance, these thoughts seemed all born in her from that new sense of freedom, the result of a direct answer to her prayer for help. She was now loosened from her bondage of self. Now she felt she could answer Gustave's letter—answer it worthily. No, she was not the same Lena, but one far more worthy of his love. She must prove that she had not entered into his life to be its bane, to make him miserable, unable to work, untrue to his life as an artist. She had responded to his love for her as a woman with all her heart; he would, she knew, if only she could rise to being worthy of her message, respond with all his soul to a union in that more beautiful, more infinite love which had been borne into her spirit. She looked round once more on the widespread scene, so solemn, gentle, and hushed in the twilight—

‘ Silence and passion, joy and peace,
An everlasting wash of air,’

then turned from the hill-side, walking up over the brow into the darkened avenue away on to the road—home.

CHAPTER XVIII

We cannot kindle when we will
The fire that in the heart resides ;
The spirit bloweth and is still,
In mystery our soul abides :
But tasks in hours of insight will'd
Can be through hours of gloom fulfill'd.

With aching hands and bleeding feet
We dig and heap, lay stone on stone ;
We bear the burden and the heat
Of the long day, and wish 'twere done.
Not till the hours of light return,
All we have built do we discern.

Then, when the clouds are off the soul,
When thou dost bask in Nature's eye,
Ask, how *she* viewed thy self-control,
Thy struggling, task'd morality :
Nature, whose free, light, cheerful air
Oft made thee, in thy gloom, despair.

And she, whose censure thou dost dread,
Whose eye thou wert afraid to seek :
See, on her face a glow is spread,
A strong emotion on her cheek :
'Ah, child,' she cries, 'that strife divine,
Whence was it, for it is not mine ?

'There is no effort on *my* brow,
I do not strive, I do not weep,
I rush with the swift spheres, and glow
In joy, and, when I will, I sleep ;
Yet that severe, that earnest air,
I saw, I felt it once—but where ?

'I knew not yet the gauge of time,
Nor wore the manacles of space,
I felt it in some other clime —
I saw it in some other place,
—'Twas when the heavenly house I trod,
And lay upon the breast of God.'

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

HER little bedroom was quite dark when she entered it. She lighted the lamp hanging by her picture. What had her picture to say to her now? She looked into that sky which from a child she had associated with a hope in the future and a happy union with Gertrude, when she herself should have passed beyond the veil and be freed for ever from the old grief. Now, as she looked into that sky, she felt as if the veil was already half withdrawn—that she already partly shared the rest, the peace, the clearer, wider light of that beyond. She had sought something, she had not known exactly what, from the mystery of that beyond; and this soul-strength had been given her. Her vague prayer for help, her urgent need, was all her part in it. It had been sent because she had asked. When most helpless, and in direst need, the gift had been given her of that peace which passeth all understanding. It must not remain hers alone if by any power she could impart it.

At once she sat down and began to write her answer to Gustave.

‘Frankly, I tell you your letter was a joy to me this morning. I could not, I cannot decide otherwise; but our separation has made me

as miserable since I left you as your love made me happy when we were together. But now, to-day, a great help has been sent me, and I must tell you of it.

‘All strength and power in life seemed to be leaving me. Every day things seemed to be growing worse and worse. But when your letter came my sense of life revived; at least, at first—when I read it. Then as the day went on I knew that feeling of happiness was only there to make the future worse. I wish I could make you understand as I do all that would make it wrong for me to be happy. But you cannot—no one can who has not known our kind of trouble. But try and believe that I am right, for the sake of that beautiful love which was sent us—try. Cast that fiend for ever behind you. To listen to him is not being true to yourself. You know I love you; and why should I, how could I make myself so miserable if any other decision was not wrong? And how could I force my judgment against yours—most of all, how could I make you unhappy—if I did not know it was impossible, because wrong, very wrong? But when your letter came—the first letter you ever wrote me: a part, as it were, of your

very self, coming all this way into this life so unlike you or your life, to seek after me—and I felt alive again, it seemed to be too difficult to accept all the unhappiness the inevitable entailed. I went out on to the hills overlooking the flooded moors and the distance in the west ; and there as I stood alone, when the reality struck me of what it meant to remain for ever separated, for a moment I felt I could not bear life without your love. It has been so lonely here, and one day so like every other day—and all days so empty of everything but thoughts of what life had been with you, and what it might have been had it been right for us to remain together ! Everything else I thought of and did seemed half a dream, with no real importance in it. It will seem strange to you that I tell you all my weakness. I have never doubted your love as that fiend told you to doubt mine ; but lately, as the days crept wearily along, leaving our fortnight further and further behind, the dreariness of the present seemed to be more and more engrossing the reality of life, the past happiness more and more a dream. Your letter placed it again vividly in the world of reality, but a reality which had to be renounced ; and how heart-breaking it seemed to renounce it ! It

was when I came quite to the end of my strength, and felt utterly helpless on the hillside alone—then it was that a new light broke in. Since then all seems easy. A beautiful sunset light burst out on to the grey clouds and the water and the hills, and with it, from beyond and above, an uplifting sense of power and help. That power seemed to burst through a barrier between the Creator and Soul of all the beauty before me and my own small self, and to merge that own self into its own being; and then I felt our love as something within a larger, more infinite love—yours securely bound with mine in the wider embrace of that more infinite life and love which gave us to each other. It will come like that to you if you have faith, and if you will believe, as you truly may, that the Lena you knew will always be the same in loving you—that it is not our will, but the inevitable will of God, which separates us here. If I were dead, already in another world, you would not quite forget me though I could not have a place in your life here. In that part of our nature which is in reality so much more real than the part which affects material actions and lines, we must always be one. This may sound theoretic and far away from us now, while we

are both still loving each other in this world as human beings love. I could not this morning have conceived such a feeling would ever be in any way satisfying, but now I can ; and this light came to me suddenly, and, it would seem, only because I needed it so much, and because my whole nature seemed to ask for it. And I see now that I have never before felt that the great Power which created everything was a loving God. Our sorrow seemed cruel. Those that I loved had such a heavy burden of the worst kind of illness to bear. But now I feel even this would not have hardened me had I sought for the help which was given me to-day. Oh ! how truly you said—do you remember, when we were together that first day in the wood ?—that human love is the only stepping-stone to the love of God which we all pretend to be seeking. The great happiness of loving you came to awaken me to a fuller life, and has led me to something better than happiness. If only I could explain it to you fully ! But it is difficult to put it into words. I feel frightened of using words and phrases to describe it which are often used with little feeling and reality of emotion behind them. My feeling is a reality to me, and seems a strong power, unlike what I connected with the word reli-

gious. It is something of the same kind, only much deeper and more satisfying to the whole nature, as the joy which the greatest art and music gives us—the art we call heavenly: an unselfish sense of feeling a happiness outside our own individual wants, something which is beyond and bigger than anything the personal egotism requires. It is also like our love, only a continuing and a perfecting of it in something which is bigger, and which cannot be affected by any circumstances or disasters. It sends a peaceful contentment into the very core, into the deepest strata of feeling, and makes me feel that happiness is possible to all under any conditions. I was so miserable—I am no longer miserable; indeed, I could be happy, even without ever seeing you, if you could only say the same. You will work; yours is glorious work. And you must be happy; for the blessing which has come to me must come to you, and will make you feel that life and love are things to be grateful for, and not to murmur at. We must not see each other, for if we did we should never want to part. We must not write, for our work in life might be half-hearted if we did—our real, full life only in our letters. Mine would be, I know; but as

long as I live, till death us do part, I shall always be the same Lena.'

When this letter reached Gustave two days later it found him in a feverish state of excitement and expectancy. He read it, and felt calmed and resigned, but far younger in life's journey than Lena, notwithstanding the fourteen years he had lived longer in the world. She had reached a shore and haven of peace. She had awakened where the fulfilment of life's real meaning, its true purport, had dawned upon her and had become hers; whereas he was still staggering in the foggy uncertainty of a dangerous journey, through unmastered miseries. But she wrote that the one thing still wanting to her peace was the knowledge that he had found the same peace and power of happiness which had been given her. That, therefore, was the thing which he must strive to obtain; for, as he had read the frank avowal of all he still was to her, a worshipful gratitude filled his heart, and he was inspired more than ever with an eager desire to serve and obey her every wish, and the yearning pain and resentful regrets were soothed and allayed as he felt reassured that she loved him still. In one sentence he answered her letter: 'In all things I will try and obey you.—G. A.'

CHAPTER XIX

Foiled by our fellow-men, depress'd, outworn,
We leave the brutal world to take its way,
And *Patience ! in another life*, we say,
The world shall be thrust down, and we up-borne !

And will not, then, the immortal armies scorn
The world's poor, routed leavings ? or will they
Who fail'd under the heat of this life's day
Support the fervours of the heavenly morn ?

No, no ! the energy of life may be
Kept on after the grave, but not begun ;
And he who flagg'd not in the earthly strife,
From strength to strength advancing—only he,
His soul well-knit, and all his battles won,
Mounts, and that hardly, to eternal life.

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

Above, below, all around are the movements of
the elements. But the motion of virtue is in
none of these : it is something more divine ; and,
advancing by a way hardly observed, it goes
happily on its road.

MARCUS AURELIUS.

L ENA walked over the fields to the village
the morning after she had written her
letter, and put it into the post-office herself.
It would not go till the afternoon, but she felt
happier to think it had travelled the first

stage on its journey. As she returned through the village street she met Mr. St. John.

'I was on my way to call and see if you were in,' she said.

'Will you come in? or shall I walk back with you?' he asked.

'Let us walk back together,' Lena answered cheerfully.

'Have you found a good "ology" and got well tired over it? You look much better,' and he turned a keen glance on her.

'I was going to tell you I did not want any "ology," Mr. St. John; something has happened, and I am longing to talk to you about it. But are you busy?'

'Is there such a thing as being busy in High Mallett? and if there was, I should put it off to hear all you have to tell me, Miss Lena. You are one of the patients I am most anxious about. I have been so worried over thinking of some "ology" that would occupy and amuse you and would not make you ill, and for the life of me I could think of nothing.'

They had passed up from the village, through the churchyard, into the fields.

Then Lena began: 'I have been very wretched, and yesterday a letter came which

made me happy for a few hours, and then seemed to bring all my misery to a climax. I walked to the monument. It was beautiful there : the wind blew so freshly ; and then came a wonderful sunset. Just before I felt, literally, Mr. St. John, as if my heart were breaking ; and, hardly knowing what I did, I asked for help, and it came—a strength and a comfort were sent. I cannot tell you how, but they did. It was no fancy. I was miserable, and something came into my very soul which made me feel miserable no longer. The strange thing to me now seems that any one is miserable if, by their simply asking, their misery can be removed. Why did I not ask before ? One has heard a thousand times that we have but to ask for the peace which passeth all understanding, and it is given. Why did you not remind me of that when you saw I was so miserable ? You are so kind and good, and you must have known that what I asked for would give no real help.’

He made no answer at first, and they walked on for a few moments in silence : Mr. St. John in his usual attitude, looking on the ground a few paces in front of him, his hands clasped loosely together behind him. Then he stopped

and looked dreamily away from Lena over the sloping, sunlit field beyond to the bright russet autumn woods, shadowed so softly in purple and blue. He said at last, not as if to Lena, but as if answering his own thoughts: 'The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh and whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit.'

Lena stood silently by him, following his gaze over the bright, peaceful, sunlit scene.

Then he turned and walked on again, presently saying: 'That is the greatest of all great mysteries. We may preach, we may exhort, we may threaten: people remain just as miserable, because just as self-centred, till—the miracle takes place within them. You ask why is any one miserable when for the asking they can have their misery removed? The only answer I can see is, as the wind bloweth where it listeth, so the Spirit descends on those to whom it is sent: no one can say why such blessedness is given to some and not to all.'

'Yes; but,' Lena said after a pause, 'it cannot be that, whatever we do, it can make no difference: that would be unjust, the kind

of Calvinism which outrages one's moral sense of justice.'

'Yes, clearly. What I mean is, all we can do, Miss Lena, is to ask assuredly for the blessings of peace and contentment, and, if they are not given, to be content so far as we can be to do without them; to leave these spiritual mysteries in the care of Him who ordains and directs them. What is outside our will and guidance we cannot be held responsible for; but what every one can do is to try and be unselfish, just, true, and merciful. And that is a large order—quite large enough for us poor mortals to cope with, without trying to master mysteries which must ever remain mysteries, as far as the future can be prophesied by the present and the past.'

'But people may be all what you say we ought to strive to be,' said Lena: 'unselfish, just, true, and merciful, and yet be very miserable unless this positive sense of peace and comfort comes to them.'

Mr. St. John answered after a pause: 'I believe, sooner or later, if people really strive to be all their consciences teach them they ought to be, if they are upright, the light will arise in their darkness. To the upright,

mind you—not those who play with their consciences in order to follow their own inclinations, whether intellectual or otherwise, but to those who will hurt themselves rather than do what they consider wrong. Light, I believe, will arise even to the most perverted consciences if only their owners keep good faith with themselves and be upright.’

Again they walked on without speaking; then Lena stopped suddenly and said, ‘Still, I cannot understand why you did not preach to me the wonderful comfort of this spiritual sense. It is as if all obstacles to real peace and happiness were taken away and everything suddenly made easy—like waking from a bad dream. I feel like that man who was in solitary confinement for sixteen years; then opened the door and walked out. Why did I not open my door before?’

‘Ah, why? why?—why anything?’ rejoined Mr. St. John with a sigh. ‘But why did I not preach to you?’ He turned, facing her, looking hard into her face; then he walked on, saying in a kind of mumbling, quiet, matter-of-fact voice, ‘If you really want to know—because I did not feel myself worthy. You have had sorrows which few are called upon to bear—you have borne them with

heroic patience, pluck, and unselfishness ; and you have now received your reward—you have been given that peace which passeth all understanding. Who was I, to preach to you ? You were doing your duty fully, and more than your duty. Your light has arisen in the darkness because you did your duty, not only in the letter but in the spirit. You were suffering and learning the lessons of suffering. Nothing I could have preached to you could have taught you the lessons that your life has taught you. All who really live must suffer through the sorrows of others, if not through their own misfortunes. Yet all of us resist suffering. We batter and batter ourselves against the cage of life—longing for happiness ; the wisest feeling that through love, and love alone, happiness is attainable—that love in any form is better than no love. But the happiness which unaided human nature dreams of is not full life : it is all a struggling and a disappointment till we fly into the real essence of love—the all-satisfying source which can really feed us, and which makes every sorrow bearable. You feel, I know, that those mysteries in pain which have been your lot, those mysteries even, have lost their bitterness.'

' Yes—yes,' answered Lena in a low, very

gentle voice ; ' they are still as great mysteries as ever, but I feel no longer a resentment against the suffering. Partly, perhaps, it is the feeling of utter helplessness that brings resignation—the feeling that nothing you can possibly do can make things different from what they are ordained to be. When you are brought face to face with the consequences of the inevitable, and see that others besides yourself—others whom you love—must suffer from it, then for the first time you seem to realise its full force, and with that comes the feeling of your own utter helplessness.'

' I may have been wrong,' Mr. St. John answered after a pause ; ' but as I could not remove your sorrow, I thought that to divert your mind with interests which strengthened your intellectual life and enabled you better to bear it, was the best help I could give you. It seemed to me almost like impertinence to suggest that I, from the spiritual fountain, could give you comfort. I could not bring myself to talk to you as one more experienced or in any sense better than yourself. I should have felt a humbug had I attempted to do so, for I knew I was your inferior in the most important matters in life.'

‘Oh, please, Mr. St. John, you must not talk like that! It is I who feel a humbug,’ exclaimed Lena eagerly. ‘What have you ever seen in me to make you say such things? I have done nothing, absolutely nothing, to deserve them. I was obliged in the nature of things to submit and make the best of things.’

‘That your nature led you to take the sorrows of others as your own, and make your own life share in them, does not lessen the virtue of so doing. But we need not discuss it,’ Mr. St. John said dryly.

‘I must have given you very wrong impressions without meaning to,’ said Lena. ‘I know that if I have had any strength from hope through all our trouble it was you who gave it me. Years ago, when Gertrude was sent away, and everything looked impossibly miserable, you taught me to hope that one day there would be comfort beyond the veil; and what you said then came back whenever I looked at my picture, into the sky behind the church, and gave me hope enough to be patient. Then you it was who gave me music, which has made life so different. Fancy what life would be if there was no music! And all the books I have really cared for and lived in

were books you told me to read and made me care for. I owed to you every pleasure that has come into life until last spring, when Lady Lovat made me her friend; and that, again, was first owing to your having made me care for good music, and teaching me how to study it.'

Lena stopped and looked with wide-open eyes into Mr. St. John's face as she summed up all the reasons for her gratitude: she felt awed, so profoundly did she find herself in his debt. She had been ungrateful for not having realised it all these years more fully; but he had always given his help as such a matter of course, and with so little paraphernalia of giving, that she had accepted it like her sorrows—as part of the nature of things.

Mr. St. John winced under her earnest, full-eyed gaze, and, walking on with a quick shuffle, said: 'Nonsense—nonsense; you make a great deal too much out of very little. I ought to have given you better help; however, now you know what real help means. You now understand what the only reliable and satisfying blessing in life is.'

'Yes, it is wonderful!' Lena answered. 'One feels it ought to be the root, the branches,

the flowers, the fruit of the whole of life, having the power it has of converting misery into contentment ; but somehow, in many lives which are good lives, it seems barely recognised. So much of life seems lived, and lived fully, without it. For instance, very happy people do not seem to want it. Artists, and those who throw keen interest into intellectual and other occupations, spend good, long, useful lives, and never seem even to need it, much less to seek it. Then, on the other hand, so much is said and preached about it which does not seem at all like the real thing. I do not recognise in this sense of peace and happiness any connection with church or so-called religion. Of course, that is my own fault ; but these do seem outside it. I feel it has to do with the sorrows and joys of my own intimate life, not with church creeds and services. All those phrases one has heard in church since one was a child seem rather to deaden instead of to quicken the reality of their meaning. Repeating them so often without full sensibility to the emotion that they ought to stir seems to cheapen them.'

'Ah ! very true,' Mr. St. John rejoined ;
'religious phraseology often exceeds in cer-

tainty of expression the experience of real feeling. Spiritual gifts, though nothing can be more real or more certain to those who have experienced their blessing, cannot be fully conveyed in words. Like beautiful music to the senses, so such joy is to the soul. It belongs to the highest emotions humanity is capable of experiencing—beyond the region of the mind, and so beyond the words which the mind has framed for its own wants.'

Lena was silent for a minute, and then rather hesitatingly said: 'No, words do not seem to convey it; but words might speak of its existence. You never preach about the existence even, of the miraculous side of religion as regards personal experiences.'

Mr. St. John turned and looked for a moment into Lena's serious, questioning eyes with a half-amused, half-sad expression. 'You don't think I do my duty to my parishioners,' he said; and added with a sigh, 'Well, perhaps I don't. The fact is, I suppose I have not the gift of that simple enthusiasm which can talk about emotion and carry with it a power for good. My nature is, I know, unfortunately secretive on all points which affect me emotionally. I am not at all dramatic.

The most effective preachers have a great sense and power in the dramatic line, and this, with sincerity of emotion, creates the great orators of the pulpit. I have no power that way. Besides, the cheap way in which emotional religion is put into a kind of sing-song phraseology, and talked about without reserve or reverence, is very repugnant to me, and, I believe, has a very blunting effect on those to whom it is not repugnant. I don't want people to get on to stilts—the very reverse; but I don't want people to talk about religious emotion at all unless they know really what they are talking about, and are not merely playing with the pleasant excitement any emotional condition might give them. The first thing among the things that can be taught is to teach people to do their duty whether it's pleasant or unpleasant: their duty being, I believe, to love God—that is, to love moral beauty rather than ugliness, and to love their neighbours as themselves, not to be selfish and self-seeking. Religion has been made easy and respectable in our modern civilised life; and in all classes you will find people indulging copiously in the forms and emotions of religion, and yet as regards the

plainest, most obvious Christian duties remaining perfect heathens: indulging in envy, malice, and all uncharitableness; harbouring prejudices that suit their own interests—in fact, being morally and mentally unclean. The tendency of religion in communities where to be religious is the right thing—the easy, the advantageous thing to be—is towards that respectable veneering of life with religion, which is fatal to sound moral and real spiritual health. Twaddle mounted on a camel; the forms of religion made subservient to the proprieties of life; a wretched, trumpery veneer instead of the living, solid wood, rich with the sap of human passions and affections, purified by the life and moving of aspiring growth, the ever seeking the great light which gave life and engendered growth. In the early struggling days of the Church, in the heroism of Christianity which goes on in our days in mission work in remote places, and even among the poor, remote from respectable life in England, you get the right thing easier; but the modern obvious world gets often over-indulged in the means of grace, and puts its real earnestness of purpose into other things.'

'Ah! but, surely, that is only true,' put in

Lena earnestly, 'when people are prosperous and happy. When they are really run to ground, every one must feel the veneer to be of no avail to cure the trouble ; because, however superficial people's religion may be, when real sorrow comes to them, then they must feel that it is only a real comfort that would help them.'

' Yes, of course ; and that 's our best time to step in. But to people who are leading their ordinary, unexciting lives the great thing is to make them lead those lives rightly according to the laws of God, rather than to try and create emotions which lead to excitements which upset their daily course of duty. Take, for instance, this village. However much spiritual excitement I should be able to get up by preaching to my parishioners an emotional kind of religion, I don't believe it would prevent one single man or woman getting drunk at the Lovat Arms who has the temptation to drink and the wherewithal to gratify it. Whereas that microscope of mine—which I think you rather despised, Miss Lena—has, I flatter myself, kept many a man from getting drunk and many a boy from getting into mischief. It's empty minds that fill public-

houses, and create the very mischief all over the place. These poor working people want their intellects put into working order. The human intellect isn't a very mighty thing at best, but it's useful to help to knead the brute into a man; and if you only go at the religion, which with them takes the form of mere emotion, you will get queer specimens I assure you — emotional piety and no end of vice all going along together. I've seen it, alas! and the poor, so-called spiritually-minded clergy, if they are earnest and sincere, breaking their hearts over it. A clergyman's work in a place like this is different from the work of a man who has to combat with the intellectual conceit of the over-civilised classes.'

'What would be your text to them, Mr. St. John?' asked Lena.

For a moment he did not answer; then, in the low, quiet, matter-of-fact voice he generally spoke in when he was particularly in earnest, said:

'That no thought or feeling of human nature is without the so-called supernatural element; that no work is really strong in influencing the current of the world's course that does not in its conception overstep the borderland

of the purely physical and intellectual; that even in matters which apparently belong merely to the physical side of life, it is the touch and suggestion of the spirit which makes things beautiful even to the senses; that it is this soul-satisfying power which can turn æsthetic delights into sublime sermons—which can make our music, Miss Lena, the best medium for our prayers and praise. Don't you feel this to be so?'

'Yes, yes, yes,' eagerly exclaimed Lena. At last Mr. St. John had thrown down the barrier and seemed to be talking from his own true, real self, without reserve; and that self responded to her own nature. She went on: 'And you do not discredit it—my miracle? I'm afraid, if any one had described it to me before I had experienced anything of the same kind myself, I should have put it down to some hysterical condition. But you can believe that what came to me yesterday as comfort was the answering touch of the greater Spirit on mine responding to my feeble, vague effort to pray?'

'What else could it be? But there, dear Miss Lena,' he said almost irritably, rubbing his fingers quickly over his forehead, 'don't

ask me to define any further. It is all such a mystery; and when we try to lift the veil and see things we are not intended to see or understand, it all becomes so much more human and less divine.'

They had reached the gate leading into the garden at Islebarton, and were standing looking back over the sloping field, the church and the village lying as a middle-distance between the rising meadows they had just crossed and the further stretch of fields and water fading away to the hills, blue against the hazy horizon. They stood silent for a few minutes. It was a morning when the world's beauty seemed full of peace and hope. Then Mr. St. John turned towards Lena and took her hand, and held it in his while he spoke:

'I cannot tell you how glad I am you have found comfort in your sorrow. You have deserved it. You are simpler, you are more straightforward, you are happier than I am. You must forgive me if I cannot talk out these things more fully with you; but I cannot. But you have reached a further goal. You know where to seek help—you do not need mine. If at any time you think you need me, you have but to tell me.'

He wrung her hand, and, looking shyly down to one side, opened the gate for her to pass through, turned, and walked down the path again to the village. Lena stood still by the gate looking after him as he went across the fields. There was humility! It was almost incredible, only that in Mr. St. John's nature sincerity was the very keynote. But that he should be so humble as to think her his superior—he, who was the comfort, the stay of a whole village population, whereas she never seemed to have done anything for anybody, her only gift being the power she had of loving others better than herself!

George returned in the evening. After dinner Lena went bravely up to the piano, opened it, and played to him a few voluntaries from Pergolese and Bach. Beethoven, Schumann, even Wagner, might come in time now! George felt surprise, but made no comment in words, only thanking her in a courteous way which seemed very distant reserve in a brother. But Lena, for the first time in her life, felt able to break down the wall between them. A larger view of everything, a dignifying influence, seemed to belong to this new sense of direct communion with

the infinitely great. Perhaps the sorriest sores human nature can suffer from in the regions outside physical existence arise out of the capacity for living freely in an atmosphere of great things with the means only of living in smaller interests. But Lena had never been tempted to adopt any line of feeling or thought that was not dignified; but she had, till Constance had seized upon her as a friend. She had been starved for sympathy in personal intercourse. From her reading guided by Mr. St. John, from her music and all it meant to her, together with her natural gifts of character and isolation from commonplace social influences, Lena had acquired an attitude of nature which was fine and distinguished. Her mind had never lived in small things, though the small things of life had been done very conscientiously by her. But with her love for Gustave the interest of everything worth doing had become linked. It had absorbed everything she cared for into itself. She had associated this love with every thought and feeling which had made life worth living, notwithstanding its sorrows. It had crowned all the interest of reading, of music, of her affection for George, with a crown of happiness,

giving them all a further and a fuller meaning. But when she returned to the monotonous, uneventful home life, feeling that that happiness was past and over for ever, the interests and occupations which had formerly alleviated its monotony and anxiety served only as stimulants to thoughts and feelings which carried in their wake unsatisfied longing and regretful sadness. The climax of all her interests had to be ignored—forgotten, if possible; but how was it possible to put her mind into those interests and ignore and forget the climax, it having once been reached? But since yesterday all had seemed different. A freer, wider world of feeling was opened to her; not the love for one could now destroy the love for everything that was worthy to be loved. And from this higher standpoint, in view of this wider horizon, she felt more freedom, more sure of her ground in every relation; so, consequently, with George the reserve of relationship relaxed in the field of wider human sympathy. He had known of her sorrow—he must share in her comfort. When she left the piano she came to his side by the fire and sat down on a little low chair close by him, and actually, though rather

timidly, put her hand upon his. Such an action had never before even suggested itself.

'I heard from Mr. Allbrectht yesterday, George,' she said.

George turned his eyes quickly and searchingly on Lena's upturned face. This, then, was the reason of her brighter elasticity that evening; of her playing again on her piano! He said gravely—

'Why did he write to you?'

Then Lena told George in her simple way all her experiences of the last two days; and she told him, too, what aching misery she had suffered during the three months since her return—and told it all with almost as much openness as she would have confided it to Gustave himself had he been there. It came naturally so—she did not force herself to be confidential. The fact was, she hardly felt it was her own present self she was talking of. George, too, felt the effect of her new strength. As a woman, independently of her being his sister, he felt an admiration and tenderness towards her. His words, however, were few, and his manner hardly less reserved than usual. But, before their talk had ended, his hand had stolen over the hand which Lena

had placed on his ; and before he let it go he pressed it affectionately, and felt that the burden of both their lives had become lighter to bear through this sympathy expressed as well as felt.

CHAPTER XX

Oh ! l'âme est une bien belle chose ! On sent sans explication qu'une seule âme vaut mieux que l'univers matériel tout entier.

ALEXANDRINE, RÉCIT D'UNE SŒUR.

Oui ! oui, cela est vrai ! c'étaient de cruels et de terribles jours ; mais aujourd'hui, par la grâce de Dieu, je pleure mon Albert gaiement.

IBID.

LONDON the prosperous, represented by Berkeley Square and its inhabitants, looked a very bright, pleasant place one May morning seven months after the events just recounted had taken place. Half-gladdened in gay sunshine, half-shadowed in cool shade, the square looked a pattern picture of pleasant, civilised prosperity. The elm-trees in the garden, bedecked with the vivid, bright green of their spring garment of young leaves, all the more surprising and refreshing in their clean and delicate beauty when contrasted with the black, smoked, and worn surfaces of the trunks and branches out of which they

had so recently sprung ; the chirping of birds in the trees and bushes, the hopping of bold sparrows on the pavements and road in search of a breakfast—all these represented sufficient of Nature in her original forms for the occasion : whereas windows and balconies filled with expensive flowers imported in hampers from country seats ; some early riders in the Park mounting shining and well-groomed horses ; the tradesmen's carts running busily here and there about the square ; the brisk errand-boys whistling as cheerily as the very birds themselves ; pleasant sounds of an emotional waltz floating on the fresh morning air from a German band playing in a street close by—these represented nature, human and otherwise, and Mayfair civilisation to boot, and gave to the scene that flavour of social life which true pleasure-seeking Londoners so keenly appreciate.

Inside one of the houses of the square Sir Bernard Lovat was sitting in the breakfast-room, waiting for Constance to come down, and reading the *Times* meanwhile. The servant, having brought the breakfast, was leaving the room, when he stood back and held the door open for her to pass through.

She held an open letter in her hand, and walked up to Sir Bernard. There was something very pathetic in the childlike expression of Constance's face when she was moved. As Sir Bernard put down his paper and looked at her, he saw her eyes, round and wide-open, full of tears, the lips a little parted and quivering.

'Oh, Bernard,' she said, before he could speak, 'it's Lena; she's very ill. I want to go at once.'

'Is that from her?' Sir Bernard asked, looking at the letter she held open.

'No, from George. Read it.'

The letter said :—

'MY DEAR LADY LOVAT,—I am very sorry that I have bad news to send you. I have for the last two months wished for a consultation, but Lena would not hear of it, as she said she had no pain, and the weakness would leave her as soon as she could get out into the open air. The first really warm day she did so. Instead of reviving her, it increased the weakness greatly, and brought on the cough so badly that I took upon myself, without asking her leave, to arrange for a consultation. It took place yesterday with Dr. Thring and Mr.

Barrow, and confirmed my worst fears. The doctors say it is a very rapid form of the disease—consumption. Forgive my not feeling able to write more particulars. Should you be thinking of coming to Mallett Court for Whitsuntide, I should tell Lena, as I think it would give her pleasure to know.—Yours very truly,

GEORGE PREVOST.'

Constance had wiped the tears from her eyes and had sat down in her place at the table.

Sir Bernard folded up the letter and looked gravely before him. 'Yes, you must go down, of course; and I don't see there is any reason why I should stay. I can't really be wanted in the House any day before they break up; there is only one more Government night.'

'Do come with me if you can,' Constance said, looking very pale, but going on pouring out the coffee. 'But I can't have the other people; no, I really can't. I shall always be living with Lena if I'm actually with her or not; and having to make merry with a party at the same time—I couldn't do it. You won't mind my putting them off, will you, Bernard? The English of poor George's letter is, she is dying,' and the tears started afresh in her eyes. 'I told you I was frightened when she

wrote to me she was quite happy and contented. There was nothing, poor dear, to make her so but that the burden of the flesh was being lifted off. If you can manage it, do let us go down to-morrow. I will write to George to-day, and he will tell Lena, and she will not have to wait.'

A few weeks after Lena's experiences recounted in the last chapters, news had come to Islebarton that Mrs. Prevost was in a dying condition in the asylum. George had always protested against Lena's going to the asylum to see her mother, fearing that the dreary impressions, so difficult to throw off in the quiet monotony of her solitary life, would fasten on her and increase her melancholy. But this time she insisted, and they remained with their mother to the end. Either returning home or at the funeral, which took place on a chilly, damp day in the end of November, Lena caught a cold. For weeks she paid little attention to it, and it seemed to get neither better nor worse. George at last insisted on the doctor seeing her, and she was ordered to remain indoors and to take various other precautions. Night after night would George lie awake hearing the hollow-

sounding cough in the deep quiet of the long winter nights. A sickening pain of dread made him sleepless. He would go gently to the door and listen. He would often see a light shining through the chink. Lena had started a new kind of literature, and had many happy nights of reading, notwithstanding the cough, which woke her up, and prevented her lying down with comfort. In the mornings she would look bright, even at times rosy—would talk to him happily about the books she had been reading, and never allude to her cough. One morning, however, just as George was kissing her before going to the town for the day, she fainted. From that time her weakness could no longer be disguised. However, Lena would have it all would come right with the summer and her being able to go out again in the fresh open air. Then, as George's letter said, he arranged a consultation with a great doctor who lived some miles away in the big town, and his dread was made a terrible certainty to his mind. Never had he fully realised what Lena was to him in his life till that evening when the doctors had left Islebarton, and he was sitting alone trying to bring the facts as realis-

able truths to his mind—trying to face what it meant that Lena was dying.

The day after George's letter had been received in Berkeley Square, the Lovats travelled down to Mallett Court ; and the next morning Constance's white figure, a basket of roses on her arm, was seen crossing the meadow, risen high with grass and buttercups, by the little path leading up to Islebarton. Lena was expecting her with joy. She felt no pain ; on the contrary, she felt a keenness of sensation which kindled and increased the power of enjoying pleasure. It was only when weakness overpowered her that she realised she was very ill ; and since the consultation had taken place between the doctors she had not left her room, and had suffered less from this feeling of weakness. So that when Constance saw her first she was surprised to find Lena, though lying on a sofa propped up with pillows, looking so much the same Lena, with even more colour on her cheeks and a brighter light in her eye, and in hearing how little her voice had changed as she greeted her quite jubilantly :

‘ Oh, dear, beautiful, white Constance ! It is delightful to have you again ! ’

Constance felt a choke in her throat, and said nothing as she kissed Lena very tenderly, but as if she were a very frail piece of china. Then she said in an unusually quiet, low voice, 'You should have told me you were ill, Lena. You always called it only a cold; I should have come down long ago if you had told me you were really laid up.'

'No one knew I was really bad till George had the doctors together the other day. I do not feel ill. I am not to be pitied. I am quite happy.'

Constance looked away. 'I have brought you some roses. Aren't they good for early ones?' she said, beginning to take the flowers out of the basket and putting them on Lena's lap. 'If Drayton will give me some glasses I will arrange them.'

And as they talked about the roses while they were sorted and put into water, Constance regained the power of appearing cheerful. Lena lay on her sofa near the window with a small table close to her. When she had sufficiently decorated this with glasses of roses, Constance asked, 'Where shall I put the rest, dear? I have lots more.'

'Under the picture, please,' Lena answered,

leaning forward a little and looking towards her treasure.

‘Oh, Lena,’ exclaimed Constance, turning round towards the fireplace, ‘that is the Apostle Kirche—your picture you promised to show me!’

‘Yes; and the little lamp you brought me from Nuremberg, which lights it at night. I have been longing for you, Constance, to talk out everything with you. I can’t say much to George—such a hopeless look comes into his eyes, I can’t go on; I have to talk as if everything was as usual, and as if I was not dying. I know it’s quite near. I made Dr. Thring tell me exactly the probabilities. He is clever enough to see that it was better to tell me the truth. And if it wasn’t for George I should be quite happy. It seems so difficult to live, and so easy to die, without pain, like this; and every one kind and taking care of one. It’s only the thought of George’s loneliness that really hurts now.’

Constance was standing under the picture looking into it, with the basket of remaining roses in her hand; but while Lena spoke she stopped arranging them. There was a pause.

‘Does it not hurt you to leave poor Gustave

Albrectht, Lena?' she then asked, absorbed in recalling that scene in Cologne as she recognised the exact spot in the picture where they all collected on the Platz opposite the church.

'No, that does not hurt at all. It is much better I should go. I quite believe him now when he said that till death parted us he should feel I was his as much as if we had been married. I have no right to think any change could take place in his love any more than it could in my own. But what does that mean? He could not think of me living somewhere in the world without a sad, regretful feeling: I know how it must be with him from my own feeling always. The pity of it! So much beautiful happiness in sight as our love was—still is—and never to see each other's faces or hear each other's voices! But once the wrench over, and the chasm of death between us, he will not love me the less, but he will get to think of me without this pain of separation. I shall be associated only with happy thoughts and love that has no sting in it at all. And the human love he can give to some one who can add to his human happiness, and I shall not be in the way at all.'

Constance threw the roses on to the mantel-

shelf and turned round. The tears were streaming down her cheeks; and, kneeling down by the sofa, she put her head on the pillow by Lena's.

‘If you don't want me to do you harm and tire you, you mustn't talk like that; I can't bear it! You are an angel already. If you really want to talk things out, you must be more human. They won't let me come and see you if I make you more ill.’

‘You do not understand,’ Lena said, after a few moments, and after Constance had sat down on a small chair close to her. ‘I wrote to you that I was happy and contented because that strength had been sent me which seemed to put everything into its right proportion, and made me able, notwithstanding the sorrows of life, to feel happy in the beautiful good things that are given for happiness. But, of course, sorrows remain sorrows to the end of the chapter. I have been accustomed to them ever since the early days with Gertrude. But it was different with him, and I felt I had brought sorrow into his life together with the joy of our love. I could not help it, but I had. Of course, I could not be really happy with that feeling. Love means nothing at all if the

pain of the person one loves does not make one unhappy. When I am gone I think he will cease to be unhappy. He will weave his love for me into the sentiment of his work. He will put the unattained in life into the attainable in art ; and, as he is a real artist, that will fill his life worthily, and I feel I shall perhaps have something to do with his becoming great and useful in the world. So you see, Constance, it comes round to selfishness after all, and you must not call me an angel. I am really happy except for that feeling that George will miss me.'

Constance did not speak, but looked out of the window across to the distant hills faint in the morning sunshine. Then she got up, saying, 'Those roses must be put into water under your picture.' As she was arranging them, Lena said—

'I want you to do something for me, Constance, if it is not too much trouble. When it is all over, will you send my picture to him?'

'Yes, darling, I will see that he has it,' Constance answered very gently, bending over the roses. Then she sat down on the little chair again, and they talked quietly and peacefully,

as friends can who need not avoid any, even the most intimate or painful, subject. But in the middle of a sentence Lena stopped suddenly, and Constance saw the pale lips blanch yet whiter, and the eyelids fall half over the eyes. The frail hand she held in hers fell lifeless. She rang the bell quickly, and Drayton came in.

‘Ah, that’s how she goes, Miladi,’ the old nurse said, quickly laying Lena flat on the sofa and using the restoratives which she kept close at hand. ‘I’m afraid she mustn’t talk any more this morning.’

‘Have I tired her?’ Constance asked, scared and white. ‘Is she fainting?’

‘She’ll soon come round, Miladi; but she must be quite quiet.’

Constance waited till the eyes opened and looked again meaningly into hers, and the lips murmured faintly, ‘To-morrow you will come, won’t you?’ and then noiselessly left the room. Slowly she walked home through the joyous meadows, so resplendent in every festive charm of spring; the hedgerows weighted down with masses of may, edging with creamy white the golden sheet of buttercups spreading away from either side of her path. If Constance had

left Lena before the attack of fainting had come on, though she knew the fact that Lena was dying, she would not have fully realised it ; Lena's manner had been so natural, her appearance so much as usual. But now she felt any moment that frail thread of life which held the spirit to the body might snap. All the joy and sunlight of the spring seemed only to increase the sense of mystery and melancholy which weighed on her as she slowly loitered through the meadows. Keenly impressionable as was her nature, and deeply as she felt the emotional side of every situation which aroused her sympathy, Constance had an active mind which seemed to move onwards with her feelings sensitively. She was inventive in finding remedies, or, if these were impossible, alleviations, to sorrow. By the time she reached the gate leading into the shrubbery at Mallett Court, her heart had led her to invent two means of giving Lena, possibly, some pleasure during the days that remained to her in the world. The first idea of comfort could be but a very small alleviation to the sad, inevitable loneliness poor George would feel when his life was deprived of his sister companion ; still, Constance thought if she and

Bernard worked really hard at becoming something in his life, at becoming real friends to him, they might shape a happier, fuller life for him with their friendship than he could have without it. She would ask Bernard, and then talk it out to Lena, who would understand what her—Constance's—friendship meant. The second idea was to write to Gustave by that afternoon's post to come—to come directly. Lena, if she knew, would theoretically object to this on the grounds that it would bring more vividly to him all she meant to wish he should forget. All the same, it would be a joy to her to see him, and a satisfaction to him, however painful, to see her at the last.

She passed through the gate into the shrubbery which ran round the three sides of the square flower-garden sunk from the terraced walk which formed the fourth side, under the south windows of the house. She did not cross the garden, hot in the full sunshine of mid-day, but kept the pathway in the shrubbery. From the further walk the principal entrance on the east side of the house was visible. Coming in view of it, half-way down that side of the shrubbery, Constance saw a cart standing on the gravel in front of the portico, and heard

voices talking cheerily ; then she saw young Massinger—Lord Massinger's eldest son—coming out, pulling on his driving gloves ; then Sir Bernard and young Mrs. Massinger, leading a sturdy little boy of two years old between them. Constance stopped. No ; she could not go into all that. The young generation of Massingers were cheery, healthy young people. Nothing could be justly said against them ; still, they were the last people to suit Constance's present mood. So she remained unseen in the shade of the yew-trees, watching the family departure.

‘ Thought you would like to see the boy, Sir Bernard,’ called out young Massinger as he got up on the seat to drive.

‘ So like a Massinger !’ thought Constance. ‘ Why, in the name of all that's perverse, should he care to see the boy only to be reminded that he hasn't one of his own !’

Mrs. Massinger was being helped up by Sir Bernard into the seat by her husband. Then he took up the boy. Constance was watching very closely, with a bitter, tight feeling round her heart. Before Sir Bernard gave the child up to his mother, he looked at him full in the face for a moment, then kissed him eagerly, and handed him up. The groom jumped up behind,

and the cart drove away. But Constance had seen a yearning look in her husband's eye. She did not stir, and let Sir Bernard turn into the house without having known she was near. She looked through the sombre branches of the yew, beyond to the flower-garden, brilliantly joyous in spring flowers and sunshine. The peacocks basking on the deep golden balustrade were whisking showers of jewel-like colour across a background of bright lawn, spreading out their tails and wings as they dressed their plumage in the sun. Though not actually in sight from where Constance stood, she had the sense of the shadowed mass of the house against the sky—the pile of beautiful Elizabethan building, so stately and grand, and yet so home-like ! Perhaps never before had Constance's face worn a sadder, less satisfied expression as she thought to herself what a wonderfully beautiful home hers was. Standing in the shadow among the plumed branches of black yew-trees, her face hardly less white than her dress, even the gold of her hair toned pale by grey shadow, she looked like the wraith of the brilliant, joyous, Titian-like-coloured Constance the world knew. She said half-aloud, ' I didn't think it was in me to be

so nasty !' Of one thing only in the whole wide world could she think of that she wanted but did not possess, and yet the absence of that one thing could make her feel small and ungenerous. To think of the thousands and thousands who never, never got their heart's desire through the length of long, dreary lives : to think of that poor child, her friend, dying without ever having for one minute in her whole life enjoyed real, full, satisfying joy ; and yet able to rejoice in feeling that her death might make it easier for her to be replaced in the heart of the man she loved ! ' No,' she went on again half-aloud, ' happiness cannot teach us everything in life ! Still, still, it ought to make one generous ! One isn't worthy of it if it doesn't.' Constance pulled herself together ; she walked on, and, entering the hall, found Sir Bernard still standing there, a county newspaper in his hand, looking for something in it young Massinger had been talking about.

' Oh, there you are, darling !' he said ; ' you have just missed the Massingers.'

' I saw them drive off,' said Constance ; ' but I was so full of Lena, I didn't feel up to being cheery. But I saw their boy, Bernard. What a bonnie rosy boy he is !'

‘A nice little chap,’ Sir Bernard answered carelessly.

‘It was nice, their bringing him over to see us. They must be proud of him,’ answered Constance.

‘Now, tell me about poor Lena Prevost,’ Sir Bernard said. He put his hand gently on her shoulder, and they turned into the morning-room together.

CHAPTER XXI

‘**D**ID you see the Lovats, Dick?’ asked Lady Massinger of her son as he put his head into the room where his father and mother were sitting, on his return to Brasely Castle from Mallett Court.

‘Only Sir Bernard,’ Dick replied, keeping the door open in his hand. ‘Lady Lovat had gone to see that Miss Prevost who is very ill. That’s why they came down in a hurry before the House broke up.’

Dick Massinger had been fetching something from the Bruport railway station the day before, and had seen the Lovats arrive. He had shut the door, when he opened it again to call out :

‘They’ve put off their people for Whitsuntide, and are going to be quite alone. Lady Lovat wants all her time free to be with Miss Prevost. They say she’s dying.’ Then Dick shut the door finally, and ran upstairs after his wife and the boy.

Lady Massinger put down her knitting and exclaimed :

‘How provoking! and how ridiculous, Massinger! But there! it is just one of Constance Lovat’s extravagant vagaries. And when I asked the Bromleys, I told them as an inducement that the Vineys and the Mountjoys would be at Mallett Court for Whitsuntide! To put off important people like that for a little personal feeling! It really is quite selfish. But I have always told you Constance Lovat never knew what was due to her position. She is like a spoilt child. I really wonder Sir Bernard does not interfere and prevent her being so eccentric. But there!’ poor, ruffled Lady Massinger continued in a petulant, injured voice, gathering up her knitting and beginning to work again in a jerky, impatient way, ‘I suppose he is as foolish as you all are about her. Because she has got that hair, everything about her is to be excused. However lovely her hair is, I should like to know how society would go on at all if every one followed their own vagaries as Constance Lovat does?’

Lord Massinger looked at the partner of his life and possessions ruffled by temper, with a slightly malicious, amused smile.

‘It’s not so much her hair as her heart that wins us all, Miladi. She has got the real courage of true kindness, and she is a splendid lesson to all the commonplaceisms of this society which you say has to go on—I am sure neither I nor anybody else knows quite why. It don’t get anybody what they want; it don’t marry one’s daughters; it don’t give people much pleasure considering the trouble and expense it is. Now, Constance Lovat’s way of going on does get her, and everybody about her, what they want. She makes every one happy, society or no society.’

‘Happiness isn’t everything,’ Lady Massinger said testily. ‘People should think of their duties, and Constance Lovat never sees the proportion in things. She does not see that when she has such people as the Vineys and the Mountjoys coming it’s unbecoming and selfish to put the party all on one side to follow out, in an exaggerated way, some little personal feeling. I feel quite as if I had asked the Bromleys on false pretences, and they will never come again.’

‘Ah, my dear, that’s another matter. I am very sorry your party is spoilt. But Constance Lovat, I think, shows she has a sense of the

proportion in things just because she put these smart people off. The Vineys and Mountjoys have a hundred places to go to, if they want visits at Whitsuntide, where they would be welcomed open-armed. It's nothing to them being put off; but to this girl who is dying it must make all the difference in life to have Constance always about her. She is better than the brightest sunshine for making you feel cheery. She has got the right stuff in her, and she is as natural and courageous as a baby in showing it. When that poor Evelyn Manners got into that wretched scrape, and all you women fought shy of her, it was Constance, young as she was, brought you to your bearings and got the woman back again into your precious fold—society. You all knew as well as she did that the poor thing was much more sinned against than sinning; but Constance was the only one among you who had the courage to say so and to act up to it. You are all so afraid of putting yourselves in the wrong box. You know, Evelina, it makes you all terrible snobs—always fearing what people will think and say of you. I suppose it's your timidity. Now, if Constance Lovat had been a man she would have been such a gentleman!'

‘It’s that kind of silly raving about her, Massinger, that you and all the men indulge in, which will make me soon quite hate her,’ Lady Massinger said more good-humouredly.

Her ire had soon spent itself. It never took many minutes to pacify the ample Evelina. But she could never quite get over the chronic grievance against Constance. Without any effort, and apparently without caring much, she got the people to come to Mallett Court whom Lady Massinger very much wanted at her castle, but who nevertheless, somehow, did not turn up there.

CHAPTER XXII

POSSESSION

There is a cloud above the sunset hill,
That wends and makes no stay,
For its goal lies beyond the fiery west ;
A lingering breath no calm can chase away,
The onward labour of the wind's last will ;
A flying foam that overlaps the crest
Of the top wave : and in possession still
A further reach of longing.'

DANTE G. ROSSETTI.

THERE are many grand rooms at Mallett Court, but none so really pleasant to live in as is the morning-room. It was the room which showed most distinctly the taste of the present inhabitants. There was Constance's touch of comfort, sense, and beauty everywhere, and that meant it was the room in which Sir Bernard and Constance lived in most when they were together alone. The walls were mostly covered with the civilised clothing of books ; the comfortable writing-table furnished with solid appurtenances which neither man, woman, nor child could destroy ;

the woodwork in the room was of old oak, equally indestructible. A pretty ancestress of Sir Bernard's, painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds, presided in slightly faded but beautiful tints over the fireplace, framed in by carved paneling. De Morgan tiles filled in the hollow of the grate; Morris chintzes covered the sofas and chairs; family coats-of-arms in old glass made the centre panes in the bay-window; and a fine old Indian carpet filled the centre of the oak floor. The plants, the flowers, and a wicker table piled up with those transient and doubtful pleasures, newspapers, would alone seem ever to want renewing. The shape of the room was reposeful and pleasant. There was plenty of space in which to roll about the comfortable arm-chairs; and the light came in broadly from the one large bay-window looking south-west. In this deep bay, turned towards the west, was Sir Bernard's own particular very deep chair, where he was sitting after dinner on the evening after the young Massingers' visit. Constance came and sat close to him on the low cushioned seat that ran round the bay under the window. She wore what Sir Bernard liked best to see her wear—a thin, soft, white muslin; and round

her throat a row of big pearls with a glisten of diamonds somewhere in a clasp. Though the sun had set, the warm light from the western sky glowed still in the shadows and ripples of her golden hair, crisply waved against the smooth rich fairness of her forehead and throat. Still warm, the light melted into the greyer tints of transparent muslin that was caught in folds over her rounded young figure, and fell from her waist over the amber velvet cushions on which she was sitting. Her head came against a background of oak panelling, silvered, not blackened, by age, which ran up each end of the bay. As she sat very still in the warm twilight, she might have suggested a beautiful picture to a colour-gifted artist—one which both Titian and Reynolds would have delighted in painting in very different manners, but both relishing the softened gold, the silvery brown, the grey tone aglow with warm, mellow light, surrounding and contrasting with the rich, lovely fairness of her complexion and the transparent whiteness of her dress. Sir Bernard looked at her with the same lover-like worship with which he had delighted in her beauty from the first day he had seen her.

But, for a wonder, Constance seemed not to notice it. Her eyes were looking away into that space of sunset-lighted sky so clear above the hill-line of purple horizon. It was a wistful, wondering look she had, and she seemed strangely sad. Sir Bernard, after a few minutes, putting his hand on her arm, asked :

‘Well, what is it?’

Constance gave a sigh. ‘It is all such a mystery—the pain and pleasure of the world! Why should those poor, dear things who are both as good as good can be—Lena and her brother—have all this sadness heaped upon them, and people like ourselves have such a good time of it? It is only a matter of days, I should think, and then that poor George will be left absolutely without one bright ray in his life: his only interest that dreary little business in the town, and otherwise, and except for Mr. St. John, complete solitude.’

‘Ah, it is all very sad—very sad indeed,’ Sir Bernard said gravely.

Constance went on, looking away again into the fading light in the sky: ‘I have felt all to-day as if I were watching the last act of a beautiful tragedy. Though it is all terribly

sad, I can't feel exactly sorry—it is so very beautiful. Lena is such a real, *bonâ-fide* heroine: no posing, absolutely no self-consciousness—a true heroine. And that means—doesn't it, Bernard?—any one who, like Lena, has been confronted with the will you, or won't you, give up your heart's desire, the very dearest thing to you, for the sake of what you think is right—your duty; and the choosing the hurt to yourself rather than your heart's desire. And how dear, how very dear that heart's desire can be, Bernard!—and Lena has given it up!'

Constance had turned again, and was looking with wide, almost awe-struck gaze, full into Sir Bernard's eyes. She went on, a slight trembling and tearful intensity coming into her voice:

'She is more than a heroine—she is a martyr: she is dying of it.'

'Inherited consumption is what George and the doctors say it is, dear.'

'Oh, Bernard, there is nothing like happiness for chasing away even hereditary diseases; and there is nothing like unhappiness for developing them. We should never, or at all events for years, have heard of this hereditary

consumption if it had not been that she gave up the greatest, the only happiness she had ever known—her whole nature's desire. She became a fuller, completer human creature through her love for Gustave Allbretcht. The atmosphere she breathed and lived in became different ; the feeling of life was a delight instead of a depression. No ; the iron entered into her soul when she gave up, not only his love, but the new and beautiful paradise which her nature would have been capable of enjoying had she allowed herself to be happy ; and I am sure it was going back to the old, unsatisfying condition of mournfulness, with her nature tuned to the other, which did the mischief to her physical health. It's what you see done every day by those fiends of selfishness, the men who feed their vanity and amuse themselves by making girls enjoy the pleasure of falling in love, only to be disappointed. But these poor things are given no choice. But Lena had the choice. She had, too, the temptation of all his passionate persuasion and eloquence ; and yet she gave it all up for what she considered her duty and loyalty to the older tie—her brother—and the home life of depression. Yes, Bernard, I

think she deserves a martyr's crown as much as any one ever did who was burnt at the stake. I know thinking over it makes me feel awfully small. I don't think I could have given you up, Bernard, for any number of mad relations. I must have had my heart's desire if I had had the chance given me. But, when one has always been accustomed to happiness, one takes it as a necessity—one's right, not as a blessing. Ah! happiness cannot teach one everything!'

Constance had stretched out one arm on to the back of Sir Bernard's chair, and had leant her head down on his shoulder.

'Of course, now, there is something we might make ourselves unhappy about. I know it's worse for you than for me. Still, it's pretty bad for me, too, sometimes, when I see a lot of jolly little dirty darlings with nothing but rags and happiness to recommend them, to think if any of them had belonged to us, what a good time we could have given them! But I think, darling, we really might both of us go on grumbling to ourselves at not having our happiness made perfect, till we grew to forget all those floods of joy that came into our lives with our love for one another, and only think of the one

thing we hadn't instead of all the things we have got.'

Sir Bernard drew her face to his own and kissed her.

'Constance, you always do hit the right nail on the head, and at the right time. The young trees we put in last year were looking very promising this morning, and I was thinking what a bore it was, as we two sha'n't live to see them really fine trees, that there wasn't a boy, just like you, Constance, with all your power of enjoyment—only a boy—coming after us to see them for us; and I got quite moody and melancholy.'

'Yes, dear; and you envied the young Mas-singers their boy—you know you did, Bernard—as you kissed him and handed him up to his mother.'

'How do you know?' Sir Bernard asked, starting. He sat up, and, turning, faced her.

'I saw you from the shrubbery. I read it all in your face, dearie, and I felt a pang of envy too; but I was nasty—so nasty—and felt angry with the possessors of the treasure for having brought it over to show you and remind you there was something you wanted which I hadn't given you. I got over it, but felt I

shouldn't be quite right till I had had it out. Anything, Bernard, is better than having thoughts we don't share together. You ought to have told me you envied the Massingers the possession of that boy. Now I've confessed I felt nasty, downright small and unpleasant, I am better.'

'My darling, what nonsense! as if you could!' Sir Bernard said, caressing her cheek and smoothing the waves of her hair.

'No, no, Bernard,' Constance said testily, raising her head away from him. 'I won't have your admiration, your love, or anything else on false pretences. I am not a bit better than any one else; but I have had everything the heart of woman can desire till now, and, because there is one thing I want that I can't have, I can turn nasty. And there's that poor child up there, who has had absolutely not one thing in life which most of us want, and yet she can actually be happy in the thought that what she wanted most may belong some day to another—that Gustave Allbretcht may one day love another woman if she is well out of the way in another world! If that isn't heroic, I don't know what is. And it's as real with Lena as real can be. She is made of the stuff

a real heroine is made of. Her strongest passion is for the highest, noblest, most beautiful good. She has passed both in love and sorrow, and has landed safely where nothing more can really hurt her.'

Constance had run on, speaking passionately, her face white and eager, her eyes very open and looking full into Sir Bernard's. He delighted in what he called her monologues. Being a man of few words himself, he liked at all times congenial ideas put into words for him by others; but when Constance spoke she seemed to put his own best feelings, as well as his ideas, into language. She went on, with a sigh:

'But, to descend to our lower level, we happy people—we must try at all events to have the virtues and not the vices of happiness, Bernard. We must think of all the happiness we have had quite perfect, and all we still have, though alloyed by a craving for something we have not got, and be grateful and try to shove some of it into other people's lives who haven't got any at all. It's all a matter of comparison. Who can say they have nothing they can wish for? We may long intensely for something we mayn't have; but

compare us to poor George Prevost when Lena is gone. A dull little business as his duty in life ; all alone, never to the end of the chapter allowing himself to love or be loved, and that weight of depression madness alone can load upon a person clinging about every association of home ! But then, compare him with the poor people one goes to see at the cancer hospital. Never, never free from agonising pain ! But then, again, they are better off than mad people. Though they suffer more acute pain, they are still in touch with human thought, love, and sympathy. But poor mad people, a curse to themselves and every one they belong to ; alive, but alienated hopelessly from all that makes life worth having ! I remember so well Lena speaking of madness as a terrible mental and moral leprosy that keeps the poor sufferers aloof from their kind. Just think of them and us, Bernard ! And yet we feel—at least I do—that it's a dreadful grievance because our happiness hasn't had its last point of perfection added to it. As if there weren't thousands and thousands of people who never come even near the shadow of it as we understand happiness !'

‘ Quite so ; but, my dear child, I am sure no

one does more for the happiness of every one within reach than you do. We are made as we are made, and the longings we have are quite natural; though, of course, it's no use making things worse by grumbling even to ourselves. But I cannot see how you could be a greater blessing than you are to every one you have to do with.'

'Well! I was thinking to-day, when poor George Prevost is left alone, we might set to work and get him into our lives really as a friend. There are friends and friends. Of course, we are by way of being friends with everybody; but I mean we might really get at him, and be something in his life. He will never have wife or children; but if we have only enough *nous* to do it properly, we might get him to feel in a way he belonged to us. It wouldn't be easy; he is shy naturally, and all that vulgar nonsense about county and town folk makes him—his fault being pride, I think—all the more shy and reserved. He won't meet us half-way; we shall have to go three-quarters of it at least, and then, perhaps, he will manage the last quarter. It may be rather a bore to you, too; because, darling, you're shy, and a shy person always finds it a double bore

to manage other specimens of the kind. But no one is ever shy long with me.'

'No'—and Sir Bernard laughed—'you're like a kitten; and who could be shy with a kitten? When I proposed for you, do you remember, Constance, your father saying of you, when it was all over, "She is something of a kitten and something of a philosopher too"?''

After a few minutes Constance came back to her point.

'Yes, I think we might manage to become a comfort to George Prevost in his poor, lonely life, and flavour it with a little more colour and beauty.' She stopped, and looked dreamily out into the quiet beauty of the twilight evening; then, with a sigh, 'And that would be using up some of our happiness well, and do us ourselves a great deal more good than grumbling that we have not got more.'

He watched her face and the appealing gravity in the wide-open, childlike eyes, and felt almost solemn—he admired and loved her so. 'Constance, you are an angel,' he said at last, drawing her towards him.

'No, I am not,' she exclaimed, changing quickly into brightness; 'I'm very much of a woman.' And truly she was so very much of a

woman to him, as in her fair, rich loveliness she clasped her arms tightly round his neck ; but a woman whom beauty, happiness, and power had made large-hearted, generous, and pitiful—whose passionate love had purified and enhanced her thoughtful unselfishness. It is, indeed, always the true fire that refines the gold, and that sends a pure flame from it. It is its flickering, mock imitation—vanity, loving love for self's sake—that hardens, unsexes, and can make a woman about the cruellest thing that was ever invented.

‘ To-morrow, when I go and see Lena, I will tell her this from both of us—mayn't I ? ’

‘ Of course, darling, of course. I will do my very best for the poor fellow, shyness notwithstanding ; but my best will be only following in your wake, Constance.’

A telegram reached Constance two days after, saying Gustave had started. Not a word to any one but Sir Bernard had she said of her having written to ask him to come. She drove into the town to George's office and told him.

‘ He had better stay with us, had he not ? ’ Constance asked.

George had hardly spoken when she told him the news of Gustave's coming ; she saw that it

agitated him, and now he did not answer her directly.

‘I hope you don’t mind my having done it?’ she said humbly.

‘No, I am grateful to you, Lady Lovat; only, if you have no objection, I would prefer asking Mr. Allbrectht to stay with me.’ The lines of his face were working in a strange, uncomfortable way. He was much moved, and Constance said good-bye almost directly.

As he was opening the door into the little street, he said, ‘May I tell Lena?’

‘Of course; you are the right person,’ she answered; ‘only I shouldn’t tell her to-night, or she might not sleep. At soonest he can’t be here till to-morrow evening.’ ‘He feels a little guilty,’ she thought as she drove away; ‘it was his letters that brought her happiness so suddenly and definitely to an end. But now he does not like the feeling of being left out in the cold. His own dearest Lena lived her most vivid life away from him, and I was in it, and he not. But he must have all he can now.’

Another telegram arrived from Gustave the next day saying he would reach Bruport that evening.

‘Well, then,’ Constance said to Sir Bernard,

‘ he *must* sleep here to-night : he cannot arrive in Islebarton so late.’

Since Lena had been unable to leave her room, George had returned from the town for an hour to sit with her every morning. They seldom spoke ; but each understood the other’s silence, and enjoyed being together. As he walked home the morning after Constance’s visit, George wondered how best to tell her his great news. She greeted him with a more than usually welcoming smile, and held up a little pencil note.

‘ Constance says she will come after your hour to-day instead of before, and to stay longer, I hope.’

‘ I am glad ; you will like to see her. But you must not tire yourself, Lena, for some one else will want to see you to-morrow.’

‘ Ah, Mr. St. John ! I want very much to see him. He must not miss so many days. If it is only for five minutes, it is a pleasure to see him.’

‘ I did not mean Mr. St. John,’ George answered. Then he sat down on the low chair by her sofa and took her hand in his. Lena did not consciously think of Gustave, but her pulse began to beat in a fluttering way. In

her weak state impressions came quickly, but were slow in forming themselves into definite thought. George, however, noticed a slight agitation, and said, 'You must not let it upset you, dear; but I have news to tell you which will make you happy, I know.'

Lena's lips parted, and her eyes grew very bright as wide-open they looked into his; but she did not speak.

'Lady Lovat wrote to Mr. Allbretcht that you were ill, and he is coming, and will be here to-morrow.'

Just a faint sound, like the echo of an exclamation, came from her lips as she still looked into George's eyes; then a radiant smile broke over her face, and, tightly pressing his hand, she laid her head back into the pillow, closed her eyes, and looked perfectly happy.

George did not move, but gazed on into her face with his big, melancholy dark eyes, tender but so hopelessly sad. Presently Lena, moving her head to one side into the pillow, said, her joy giving her a courage she had tried often of late to summon, but till now with no avail: 'George, I want you to be very kind and grant me a great favour. I know I am asking a great

deal, but will you let me show him the letter you wrote to me at Cologne ?'

George winced, and instinctively drew his hand from hers. Leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees, he half-hid his face with his hands.

Lena went on: 'My greatest wish, ever since that letter came, has been that you and he should appreciate each other. You both belong to me for this little time. Showing him that letter would make him understand you better than years of acquaintance.'

'Not at first, not at first,' George hurriedly muttered; 'perhaps some day I will.' Then after a pause, 'I promise some day I will, if it is at all possible.' To George a stranger was always an enemy, and he had felt jealous of Gustave; and for the moment it seemed almost impossible he should ever allow him, of all people, to know his secret of secrets.

'Thank you,' Lena answered. She was quite satisfied. She knew George was always better than his word. She knew this wish of hers would haunt him till it was gratified. The picture of George's loneliness when he would be without her was always haunting her; and for his sake, and Gustave's, and her own

too, they must understand each other and be something to one another.

‘Oh, Constance,’ she said later on, as her friend came into her room, ‘how clever you are at making people happy ! Every throb of joy I have ever felt in my life, I think I owe to you.’

‘Nonsense; don’t be so ungrateful to Gustave Allbrectht, Lena. I’ve nothing to do with it—I only wrote the letter ; and I didn’t tell you because I thought you would start some dull theory that it was better for his peace of mind not to see you, and stop my writing. It will be so nice seeing him again ! But you must not let it upset you, Lena, or I shall get into a scrape.’

‘Oh no, no ; it will make me better. And while he is here we will all be bright and happy ; and I can give him my picture myself now. I never felt so really happy as I do now, Constance—no, not even at Bayreuth. It is happiness without any fear in it. It feels so secure, as if it never could change. But what a wonderful thing this love is—the human love, and then that greater Divine Love ! He seemed to take the whole of my nature into his and return it to me glorified ; and when this joy met the wear and tear of the sadness

of the world, and would not fit in with it, then this great haven of peace opened, and in it there is rest for him and me. I know there will be for him as well.'

'It's such a different thing,' answered Constance after a pause, 'this love, when you feel the real thing yourself—isn't it, Lena?—from the falling in love you associate with suitable marriages and the ordinary engagements that people talk of as to be or not to be, as one would talk of taking a trip abroad, or buying a house, or hunting or not hunting. One does not recognise the thing we feel in those kind of arrangements that end in most marriages—with perhaps, just a little more flavour and excitement about them than the other duties of life, to be accounted for, perhaps, by the presents and the trousseau.'

'No, one does not recognise our kind of love in all that,' and Lena looked away out into the glowing sunshine; 'nor did I recognise, Constance, that other love which was given to me to heal the wounds of the human feeling in the religion that is the every-day food of so many. I was not ready for the blessing; I had not won it. That sky in my picture was the only church that I really worshipped in, because it

pictured a future to me beyond the veil where there was real community, and where Gertrude would be released from her cross. You see, our sorrow seemed to isolate us from the sympathy of the people who could not understand it. So it was hardly like worshipping with fellow-creatures, going to church ; one felt them so far off from one's own life and troubles. But when I met Gustave—he may be my Gustave for the little time left—he seemed to understand it all, to care to understand it, to wish to share it ; and so my love for him seemed to have in it the meaning of everything. I understand so well now what he meant when I said I did not see the use, from the highest point of feeling, of the Pagan story of Tristran and Isolda. He answered me that human love is the only stepping-stone to the higher life ; that we must love somebody better than ourselves, irrationally, overwhelmingly, or we cannot know what real sorrow or real joy mean. We cannot reach the utmost limits of our nature without having loved some one even better than our own souls. But, once having reached the real end of ourselves, then we feel our helplessness, and we can enter into the blessing of that wider love which will enclose ours and

make us part of its own. Death alone gave the larger life to the Pagan, to poor Tristran and Isolda ; their tragedy ended with life. But the tragedies of Christians end when they give themselves up in this life to the will and control of the spirit of Divine Love. Then, not only does the suffering and conflict end, but the possibility of the worst suffering has ceased. You see, Constance, I was to be envied, and not pitied, ever since this came to me. Of course, it is nothing new—only what every good clergyman tells every one ; but I never understood it till I lived it.'

'I see,' answered Constance dreamily ; 'and you must suffer to live it ! Of course, if you have no cross, how can you learn to bear one ? I suppose the moral of it all is, when the lightest cross is given us, instead of even complaining, we should welcome it. But feelings are feelings, Lena, and very perverse too. What I want I always want so very much, and it seems a great grievance not to have it. The Devil is hard to kill. He is very tenacious of life, that old gentleman. But if one fights him well, I suppose he must get a little tired out at last when one gets really old.' And Constance looked sadly away over to the blue, distant hills.

Since the moment when she had seen in her husband's eye that longing, unsatisfied yearning as he looked into the rosy boy's face, the wish that had been but latent, though chronic, in her own nature had developed into an active, ever-present desire. The fact that Sir Bernard had never spoken of it except when she referred to it, and then had treated it as a matter of very small importance to him, now took a very different colour to her mind. He did not speak because he would not have her pained by the sorrow it was to him. That one look had shown her how much he was hiding from her. And if she did not make a good fight at once, this little rift of separate thought and feeling would widen and widen. It never could make the music of their love quite mute, but it might bring a something between them which would spoil its perfect happiness. So she had spoken at once; but the having it out could not dispel the cloud that look had shown existed in her husband's life, and which, once recognised in his, had therefore gathered over hers also. There must always remain the fact that he had hoped and did long for something from her she had not given him. The power and habit of dispensing joy, which

was the chief delight of her nature, had been so rarely checked, she hardly knew how to resign herself and be patient under the weight it was to her to feel that the being so infinitely dear to her was in need of something she could not supply. Then she thought of Lena. She could be resigned and happy ; yet not one single day's complete human happiness had been vouchsafed her in life ; nor had she, the tender-hearted passionately pitiful Lena, ever been able to give to her love aught but disappointment and trouble : but notwithstanding all this she was in possession of the secret of peace. She had learned the real lesson of life, had learned it through bitter sorrow. Was it for her, Constance, to resent the first trial which might help her to climb the steep ascent ?

CHAPTER XXIII

HOW the little train on the single line seemed to Gustave to loiter, and how often it seemed to stop, that evening as he was nearing his Lena! One moment he despaired of finding her still alive; another the joy of seeing her again triumphed over all anxiety and sadness. He was tired out with travelling; but excitement prevented his knowing it. This was the station at last! And, as the train slowly stopped, his heart seemed also to stop beating. But he caught sight of Constance on the platform, and he sprang out of the carriage.

‘How is she?’ he asked, grasping tightly her hand.

‘No worse; about the same. I can hardly realise she is so ill, she seems so very much our same Lena.’

The tears started to his eyes. The relief was great. Constance had driven down to

the station to meet him, and they were soon driving on the way back to Mallett Court together in her brougham.

‘You must not go to Islebarton to-night,’ she said, ‘though her brother wishes you to stay there and not with us. She does not know you could come till to-morrow. She has so little strength to pull on, she must not run the risk of a bad night. She is very, very ill, only she has no pain; and of course, being Lena, she makes no fuss about her illness, and speaks naturally and quite happily and cheerfully, as if nothing could be the matter any more. And, since she knows you are coming, I think her face looks more completely happy and peaceful than any face I ever saw. And we must all try and appear the same, Mr. Allbretcht; at all events, pretend to be happy, even if we can’t, for her sake. Death seems a terrible enemy to us who love her; but it does not to her, and we must not let our sorrow cloud her spirit. I am so glad you have come to share it all here with us, and to make her quite happy. You must go up with me about eleven o’clock to-morrow; it is when I go every day to see her. She won’t expect you till later, but it is better for her

not to have the excitement of expecting you so long.'

'Ah, Lady Lovat, you are the same good friend as ever,' poor Gustave said, feeling a great comfort in Constance, and a rest in giving himself up completely to her judgment and guidance.

Next morning they walked up through the bright meadows of buttercups together. Gustave had never been in that sweet, rural west country before.

To him, that morning, in the beauty of its May adornment, it seemed suggestive of unutterably calm spiritual peace. The last act of *Parsifal* came into his thoughts as silently he walked by the side of Constance, up towards the little home which contained for him that spark of flickering life which meant for him all earthly love and happiness. The sunshine, the happiness of spring, the joyousness of sparkling light, all echoed back the solemn feeling in his heart.

Constance had laden her basket to-day, not with roses, but with sprays of full-blooming lilac blossom. Leaving Gustave below, she mounted the stair and knocked at Lena's door.

'What lovely things!' Lena said. 'I was

thinking I wanted flowers. I don't look very ill, do I, Constance ?'

Constance noticed that Lena had made alterations in her invalid's dress. To-day she was in a pretty, thin white wrapper.

'I never saw you look nicer,' she said, bending down to kiss her.

'It is not that I want to look nice ; but if I looked as I am, so very ill, he would be shocked—I know one cannot help it. When I have seen the poor people with that look of death on their faces, it makes you feel they are half away from you already. There is something between you and them ; a mystery, an unseen phantom, hangs between, and shades them. Oh ! I want him to feel once again—only for once—that I am here, and all his. I want him not to remember any more that dreadful parting at Cologne when I gave him so much pain.'

'My darling, you look so much the same Lena he first saw, I can hardly believe you are so ill. You are thinner, more transparent, but there is no look of illness such as would pain him. So be quite happy and calm, and I will make all your room pretty with the lilac.'

Presently Lena asked, 'You have not heard again?'

Constance said, 'I have not *heard*——' and stopped speaking abruptly, finishing putting the last sprays of lilac into a glass on the mantel-shelf under the picture. Then she turned and looked Lena very full in the face.

'Is he here?' faintly came from Lena's parted lips as she looked back wonderingly, reading something of meaning in Constance's face.

'Yes, he is here. Shall he come up?'

'Oh! yes,' and Lena's head fell back in the pillow. Her eyes closed. A rapturous smile spread over her face. It *was* to be then—this great, wonderful happiness of seeing him again! No accident was to come at the last and snatch it from her. She had made herself think of everything that possibly could happen to stop his coming, so as not to be too certain, and then disappointed!

The great moments of life that gather up into themselves the memories and feelings of days, of months of the past, and hold in their vividness the food for the thoughts and inspirations of a long future, the moments which to describe from an outside view are so soon

over, and yet which contain the thousand vivid pulsations of a whole lifetime of sensation to those to whom they are the great moments: how can any words record them! When Constance had opened the door and quietly shut it again, leaving Gustave and Lena once more steeped in the great happiness of each other's presence, everything faded from their minds but the sense of that happiness. Each saw the reality of the dear face that had haunted their memories for months there before them; all the aching pain, the yearning, the sadness of their separation, was extinguished,—dispelled from their consciousness like bad dreams, now that they were in the fulness of such a waking to real life again!

He had walked straight up to the couch on which she was lying, and she had stretched her two hands up to him, and he had taken them and held them lovingly in his. They looked into each other's eyes, neither able to speak out a welcome in words. As with children when most happy, the sensation of joy they felt was so positive and distinct, it seemed outside and over and above the cause which created it. At last, from Lena came in a stammering flutter of detached sounds:

‘It is all right now—I never thought this could come again—I am quite happy!’

He knelt down by her side and kissed the little white hands over and over again, his tears falling fast over them.

An hour passed. He asked her often if he was tiring her—whether he ought to go.

‘No, I feel cured,’ Lena answered, ‘I feel no longer ill. I may get ill again if you go away.’

And so the time went, each trying to obliterate the pain of the past by recounting it to each other in the joy of the present.

‘But you have not looked at my picture!’ Lena said, pointing to it. ‘Look, is it not exactly the same as when we stood before it the first day in Cologne? The sky and everything?’

Gustave got up and looked for some moments into the picture without speaking.

‘How wonderful!’ he said at last.

‘Yes, was it not like a miracle when you think back upon it all?’ said Lena. ‘I want you always to keep it for my sake, though I daresay it is not high art. Will you?’

After a pause, he said, ‘We will never part with it. It is a bad little picture, excepting the

sky, but it is the most precious bit of painting to me that ever brush put on canvas !'

Three days passed—three happy days for Lena. But after that first hour of joy at again seeing her, again hearing from her own lips that she was the same Lena who had given him her love, Gustave became more alive to the consciousness that a heavy load of dread and pain pressed on him : a dread and pain which in her presence became latent, but which at other times, as he realised how completely life at Islebarton was centred round the invalid, of how much importance the doctor and nurse thought every detail of the nursing, grew active away from her and lay with a sickening weight on his heart. He would not acknowledge it to himself, he would not let a trace of it be seen by others ; but there it was, striking a note of tragedy into all the beauties of the 'wunderschöne Monat Mai : ' making him grasp greedily at every second he was allowed to be with her—making him feel, in fact, as if he were standing on the edge of a precipice, for the last time in the light of happiness, before being plunged deep into an abyss of dark, terrible despair. But they were happy days for Lena.

The doctor could not be got to say she was better. He said very little, and there was evidently little for him to do when he came except to watch that all the details of the nursing the big doctor had ordered were carried out. George and Gustave had become friendly over the deep interest they had in common, but they had not yet struck the real vein of intimacy. The sick-room itself seemed the place where there was the least sense of sickness, so unaware herself did Lena seem of her own state. In the excitement and happiness of Gustave's visits she often felt as if she were going to get quite well.

On the afternoon of the fourth day—it was a Saturday—George asked Gustave to walk with him to the spot where Lena had watched the wonderful sunset in the previous autumn. Gustave had been sitting an hour with Lena, who seemed stronger and brighter than usual. With a lighter heart he walked off with George. They passed along the road, through the fields, out into the clear space round the column, and over the brow of the hill to the group of firs. A different aspect, indeed, had that beautiful scene before them, in the gaiety and fairness of May spring-time, from that Lena

had witnessed in the fading of the year. The sunshine glistened brightly through a gauzy mist which veiled all fulness of colour. The distant hills were faint, hardly traceable, in the bright afternoon light. From the bartons below there was a lowing of cattle. The rapturous song of the larks rang out their music from very high in the sky. Here, on the spot where Lena had stood, George gave Gustave the letter he wrote to Lena at Cologne. And there, though very few words passed between them, her brother and lover became friends.

The sun had set before they started home. As they took the last turn on the road which brought them in sight of Islebarton, they saw two carriages standing near the gate—the doctor's gig and Constance's little pony carriage. Something unusual must be going on, was the feeling which came into both their minds as they quickened their pace, but without speaking.

The gardener was at the gate, and, as he held it open and they passed through hurriedly, he said, 'Oh, sir, I didn't know where to find you; Miss Lena's taken worse.'

Noiselessly they almost flew up the little

staircase. On the landing outside Lena's door stood Constance, very white and trembling. She beckoned them to follow her into the little empty spare-room opposite, and said in a low, agitated voice : ' The doctor and nurse are with her ; no one must go in. She fainted. She told nurse she had rather be alone, and she must have tried to walk, for nurse found her on the floor in a faint some way from the sofa. This morning she told me she was sure she could get up and walk, she felt so much stronger. We must wait till they come out. I came before the doctor. They came to fetch me and ask me if I knew where you were ; and when I left her she was still unconscious, and the doctor said no one must be in the room except nurse and himself.'

Minutes passed—half-an-hour—an hour : still the door remained closed. At last, after the clock in the hall had struck ten, gently they heard the handle of a door turn, and saw the doctor's figure come out on to the landing. George went out and drew him into the room where the three had remained awaiting news, and closed the door. There was no candle, only moonlight coming through the open window, lighting the pale, expectant faces.

‘She has just gone off into a doze. She came-to half-an-hour ago, and I thought it would all be over then, but she has revived a little. She may live through the night in a doze, or she may go off any moment. There’s nothing more I can do; but I’ll stay if you like, Mr. George.’

‘Is there no chance of her getting back her strength?’ Constance asked.

‘I’m afraid not, I’m afraid not. You wouldn’t wish me to say anything but the truth. It must have come very soon, anyhow. She was as ill as she could be, and has been these last two weeks; only she didn’t know it because she had no pain, and lying still she didn’t feel her weakness as most do, and her spirit kept her up; but the temperature’s been all wrong, and nothing of a pulse for these three weeks. Nurse knows what to do; but if you like I’ll stay.’

‘There is no occasion to keep you up, Mr. Barrow, if, as you say, you can do nothing more,’ George muttered in a hollow, low voice.

They were better without him. The sad dread had changed into a terrible sorrow. The blow seemed already to have fallen.

Constance said, as Barrow was noiselessly

leaving the room, 'But we *must* see her once more !'

'Oh dear, yes ; I will tell nurse to watch her, and when she sees the change to call Mr. George, and of course any one who wishes to see her, Miladi. It won't make any difference then ; but if she's wakened up out of her sleep it would be bad. I think she's likely to sleep till the dawn now.'

Constance said to George, 'May I stay ? I will send a message home to Sir Bernard. I will stay in this room if I am not in any one's way.'

The night wore on ; in solitude each waited for the summons. But hour after hour went on, and there was no sound in the little house but the regular ticking of the clock in the hall.

A feeling of awe comes with the first light of dawn. Distant things seem to come close to you from the horizon, bearing in a solemn whisper some message from the beyond. So it seemed to Constance as she leant out of the open window of the little room, one awakening chirrup of a bird in an apple-tree close by making the silence felt. But what was the message ? What was indeed this—Death—that hovered so near over the little house,

waiting to take her friend away into the unknown ?

A quick, gentle opening of a door, a rap at hers, and the nurse came in. 'Will you please go at once, Miladi ? I must call Mr. George.'

'And Mr. Allbretcht,' added Constance in a choking voice as she crossed the landing. The door of Lena's room was ajar. She went in, and passed round the foot of the bed to the other side. Resting her arm gently round the top of the pillow, in a soothing but perfectly natural and firm voice she said, 'You are leaving us, darling, for a while. We shall all try and follow you some day.' Lena's eyes were wide open. The white lips, parted, were tightened back as she gasped for the breath that was fast going. A faint smile fluttered over the transparent features, and seemed to assent.

The door was opening again, and Drayton held it back for George and Gustave to pass through. Both stood by the bed opposite Constance. The white hand that lay outside the sheet moved towards George. He took it up very gently, and, bending over her, kissed the brow already cold. Then he passed the little hand into Gustave's, who held it in

both his like some holy thing. The dying gaze turned towards Constance, then wandered across to George ; on into Gustave's eyes for a longer moment ; lastly to the picture on the wall opposite. There were no sobs, no words.

After a still silence, startlingly clear came the words, 'Beyond the veil.' A flicker of the last faint spark of life, then the solemn silence of the end.

As the spirit returned to the God that gave it, the sightless eyes still rested on that evening sky behind the church, for so long the symbol of a hope which had had alone the power to soothe the bitter pain of the saddest of sorrows.

All was over. This time, not the bright, ruby-winged god, but his sister mystery Death, had alighted and folded her ashen wings round her prey.

CHAPTER XXIV

Let us not dream our loved ones die alone ;
We, too, are straitened in their winding-sheet,
We wear their charnel weeds, our willing feet
Were fain to follow theirs in ways unknown.

ELINOR MARY SWEETMAN.

A N hour had passed, and Constance was walking back to her Bernard and her home, through the joyous meadows, sparkingly brilliant with early dew and sunshine, on the Sunday May morning. Bareheaded, Gustave was pacing up and down the path in the meadow outside the garden. Hardly knowing what he was seeing around him, he suddenly became aware of a black figure approaching. When near him it stood still, and Gustave, stunned and feverish, staggered as he stopped short in the swinging pace of his walk, lifted his eyes and saw Mr. St. John.

‘How is Miss Prevost?’ he asked bluntly, without any preliminary greeting.

‘Miss Prevost?’ Gustave said in a far-off,

questioning voice, seeming to try to attach a meaning to the sound ; then with a start, and in a hard, metallic voice, came the detached words, ' She is——It is all over.'

At the moment Gustave was hardly conscious of what he was looking at ; but afterwards a picture came back to his mind of the motionless figure standing as if transfixed in the meadow before him, with uncovered head, in the rusty black coat : knee-deep in the bright yellow buttercups dazzling in the early morning dew ; the thick grey hair shining like silver against the background of golden flowers ; the piercing steel eyes flashing with a wild excitement and fixed on the drawn blind of the sightless window of her room ; the rugged, prominent brow contracted by a sudden spasm of pain. Had he, too, loved her ? Or was it the remembrance of a past story in his own life her death had vividly recalled which had added such a strange emotion to the sorrow of having lost a friend ?

One evening, a few days after Lena had left them, Constance and Sir Bernard were again sitting by the window in their morning-room, with Islebarton and the pathway leading from it to the high-road in view. While they had

been watching the sunlight fading in the sky, they had talked over plans for getting George to do something which might make his loneliness a little less dreary. The funeral was over; they had said good-bye to Gustave, who was starting that evening for Germany. The one desire he now had was to be back in his studio alone. Work might be impossible; but there, and there alone, could he retire into his own most individual life, into that life which Lena had entered, and over which she had reigned—the only one which he felt would be endurable, now that nothing seemed left in the world for him to do but to mourn her. George had promised Constance to come to Mallett Court in a few days. She and Sir Bernard had done everything for him in his sorrow. They had, without asking him, arranged all that had to be arranged. He was grateful—very grateful—but could not find the words or utterance to say he was. With Lena half of himself seemed to have gone out of the world; but there was something in the kindness of these friends that helped to prop up the poor lonely half that was left.

‘It seems to me,’ Constance said, in answer to Sir Bernard, who had been eulogising and

pitying George, 'every other trouble in the world is a joke compared to madness.'

'The sorrow of it has been brought very near us,' Sir Bernard answered.

'I suppose the truth is, every one who feels keenly thinks his own sorrow the worst.'

'You have your cross, and you bear it, my darling, like a heroine.'

'No, no, Bernard,' Constance answered quickly and very seriously; 'I am no heroine. I have never been given the chance of being one, and no one can say how they would behave till they have had the chance. I have never had to choose between my heart of heart's desire and what is right. You must always see me exactly as I am—neither better nor worse—and love me as I am. Anything like blearing the truth for the sake of making things pleasanter would mean loosening the very pivot on which everything goes round—our love as well as everything else that is important. That we haven't got all we want has been no result of choice. Of course, we can both imagine a joy for which we would both willingly give up all our money and lands and luxuries, because the having it would seem to make our love more perfect; but that is a

very different thing from what is meant by the iron entering into the soul. I have not lost you, Bernard. I have not had wrenched from me that thing which gives a meaning to everything else in life. And even that would not be so sore and sorry a business as poor Lena's; for to be as happy as I have been for six years would alone, as things go, make a life worth living, and compensate for many years of joylessness. But Lena, poor Lena—to have this joy dangled before her eyes and she might not take it! Having to refuse it when it might have been hers for the taking!’

Constance paused a moment, the tears welling up in her eyes. Then she added very quietly, looking away into the golden tender west, ‘One feels stranded: Lena was so close to one, and any answer to the “Where is she now?” must be so vague! But she has left me a very definite legacy:—I feel now if sorrow, if the worst sorrow came, that it would be possible to meet it and make something out of it. She has taught me that sorrow can be made even more beautiful than the best joy.’

A few minutes after, in her usual eager voice, full of life, she exclaimed, ‘Oh, Bernard,

there is poor Gustave coming down the path from the gate. He is alone ; but look, I am sure that is Lena's picture he is holding under his arm.'

Twenty minutes later, as they were sitting still talking, and darkness was creeping fast over the twilight, a faint, far-off whistle was heard.

' Ah ! there goes his train,' Sir Bernard said.

Yes : Gustave, the picture close to him, was soon being whirled away up the Great Western line to Paddington ; across the Channel, away to Cologne, where the picture and his love for Lena were both born ; from whence the picture had wandered—no one knew how—to the far-off, sad little west-country home. It returned to its birthplace, the only tangible relic of a happiness so short, so chequered, so unfulfilled ; but the memory of which, by inspiring Gustave with a perfect faith in the faith of another, will ever remain his truest guide to the ' best thing in the world.'

THE END.

